National Archives and Social Media

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Just a reminder: the hashtag for this session is #ICA_2012

The social media implications of the records of the U.S. Government caught my attention even before I became Archivist of the United States.

In August of 2009 while I my nomination as Archivist of the United States was being vetted, I saw the job description posted by the White House for a social media archivist.

And then in September while I was awaiting the scheduling of my confirmation hearing before Congress, I read in the press that the White House was seeking Request for Quotes for a "contractor to provide the necessary services to capture, store, extract to approved formats, and transfer content published by EOP (Executive Office of the President) on publicly-accessible web sites."

So, even before I began my work in November of that year, I was asking social media related questions about the records of the U.S. Government and the role of the National Archives.

A little context about the role of the National Archives to put this in perspective. We are the nation's record keeper responsible under two sets of Federal laws—the Federal Records Act and the Presidential Records Act—for the records of the 250 Executive Branch offices and departments and the records of the White House. Today that represents about 12b pieces of paper and 40m photographs and miles and miles of film and video and many terabytes of electronic records, the fastest growing part of the collection. To give you a sense of scale, we started collecting White House electronic mail during the Ronald Reagan administration and have 2.5m messages from the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations combined, 20m from the Bill Clinton administration, and 210m from the George W. Bush administration. So, we have been managing electronic mail since 1982.

Since the National Archives is responsible for providing guidance to the Federal Agencies and the White House on the records implications of the technologies they are using, I feel strongly that the National Archives needs to be out in front in the use of and experimentation with new and emerging technologies. I expect my staff to be in a position to anticipate which technologies are going to be used by the Government to do its work and communicate with the American public. And today that means social media.

The use of social media in the United States and the expectation to find what you need through social media platforms increases exponentially each year. Two recent reports from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, one entitled "Social networking Sites and Our Lives" and the other, "Why Americans Use Social Media" cite the facts that 79% of American adults use the Internet and 66% of them use social networking sites—more than double the number since the same survey done in 2008.

So let me describe the current social media landscape within the United States Government, talk about the guidance the National Archives is providing, and finish with a view of the range of our social media experimentation within my own agency.

According to a report prepared in March by the Congressional Research Service, Executive Agencies are increasingly using new media technologies to communicate with the public. At present there are more than 1,504 federal government domains and thousands of websites on these domains. As of June of last year, 23 of the 24 federal agencies surveyed had a presence on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. All 15 of the President's Cabinet agencies have at least one Twitter account. A survey of 3,000 Federal managers found that a quarter of them used Facebook for work purposes. The National Archives was singled out as heavy users of these new communications technologies.

President Obama, on his first day in office, issued an Open Government Memorandum which declared that:

"executive departments and agencies should harness new technologies to put information about their operations and decisions online and readily available to the public. Executive departments and agencies should also solicit public feedback to identify information of greatest use to the public."

And he set an example by making extensive use of new media in the White House and has assembled a New Media staff who is pushing the envelope in the use of new technologies—operating a YouTube channel, filtering photos on Instagram, crowdsourcing petitions on We The People, hosting Q&As through Twitter, and even hang out with votes on Google+. The President has been a huge social media fan for some time. During the campaign for the Presidency he had 380% more Facebook fans than his rival!

My agency has provided guidance to the heads of Federal Agencies and to the White House on managing records using 2.0 social media platforms. Since open and transparent government, as mandated in the President's Memorandum, increasingly relies on the use of these technologies, and as agencies adopt these tools, they must comply with all records management laws, regulations, and policies. This is very much a collaborative responsibility involving agency records management staff, web managers, social media managers,

information technology staff, privacy and information security staff, and other relevant stakeholders.

Our guidance is extensive and covers microblogging, blogs, wikis, mashups, social networking, social bookmarks, virtual worlds, crowdsourcing, photo libraries, video sharing, storage, and content management. The guidance provides a series of questions to test the record worthiness of the content:

- Is the information unique and not available anywhere else?
- Does it contain evidence of an agency's policies, business, mission, etc.?
- Is this tool being used in relation to the agency's work?
- Is use of the tool authorized by the agency?
- Is there a business need for the information?

If the answers to any of the above questions are yes, then the content is likely to be a Federal record.

As I said earlier, I firmly believe that if we are to provide the guidance which I government needs to manage the electronic records of the country in an appropriate manner then the National Archives needs to be a leader in the use of and experimentation with new media. So, let me turn my attention to our own social media strategy which is focused upon our own staff, our government colleagues, and with our researchers and citizen archivists.

I'll end with a report on the work we have been doing to improve the user experience through the use of social media.

When the President issued his Open Government Directive in 2009, he said "Our commitment to openness means more than simply informing the American people about how decisions are made. It means recognizing that Government does not have all the answers, and that public officials need to draw on what citizens know." Knowing we do not have all the answers, we are creating opportunities for citizens to provide substantive contributions, including tags, transcripts, and images.

I first urged our agency to cultivate Citizen Archivists in April 2010 on my blog. I said then and continue to believe that we learn so much more about our records when someone makes use of the materials and helps us better understand and then describe what we have. This is a lesson I learned after many years of working with faculty and students in research libraries. So what can we do to make it easy for our users to contribute to our understanding of the records they are using?

Since that blog post, we have launched many social media projects and currently have 135 projects on 13 social platforms, including Flickr, Facebook, Foursqure, GitHub, HistoryPin, Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube. When I arrived at the Archives we had a handful of staff involved in social media. Today, over 900 staff are providing content for our internal and external social media projects and we are working to get everyone involved.

Last winter we launched the Citizen Archivist Dashboard, a website that invites citizen archivists to work on any of our crowdsourcing projects, regardless of the platform. Our Flickr and Wikipedia initiative are available through the website, as well as a new transcription tool that we have developed using open source coding. We were surprised and delighted to see 1000 pages of our handwritten records transcribed in the first two weeks that the transcription tool was live online. Some or the documents were in languages other than English and our citizen archivists not only provided transcriptions, but provided translations as well.

In early April of this year we released our 1940 Census to the public—the first Census to be released electronically. It includes 3.8 million pages of records totaling 16 terabytes of data. Since the launch, the website has received over 4.9 million visits. And a crowdsourcing event led by Family Search had more than 250,000 people around the United States creating the name index for the Census—an amazing testament to the power of crowds.

And, finally, in May 2011, we welcomed our first Wikipedian-in-Residence, at the time one of nice such positions in the world. Since he has been on board, we have uploaded 90,000 digital copies to the Wikimedia Commons. He has worked with us to host numerous scan-a-thons, as well as the local celebration of Wikimedia's 10th Anniversary and to participate in Wikimania 2012 an international gathering held in Washington this year.

One example of the power of Wikipedia. We have a feature known as "Today's Document"—a photo or document with a small explanatory blurb, one we think would be especially interesting to the public. It is available as both iPhone and Android apps as well as a popular Tumblr blog. Since we launched these the apps have been downloaded 50,000 times and the Tumblr blog has a following of over 25,000. But when our Wikipedian got one our photos on the main Wikipedia page, it was vied 4m times in 8 hours. 4 million!

I'll close with one last example of exploiting Web 2.0 technology to better serve the American public. The Federal Register is the government's daily newspaper—it is a public record of actions and proposed actions of all the departments and agencies in the Executive Branch. It has been printed in paper since 1936 and went online in 1992. We marked the 75th anniversary of the Federal Register in July 2010 by launching a Web 2.0 version which function much like a newspaper web page. It is a new, user-friendly version of the print edition which makes it easier for our citizens to find what they need, comment on proposed rules, and share materials

relevant to their interests. Like a newspaper, it has individual sections: Money, Environment, World, Science and Technology, Business and Industry, and Health and Public Welfare. It also has a calendar of events that lists public meetings about proposed government actions. And it tracks the openings and closings of comment periods on proposed rules and regulations and effective dates of new rules. Each document that asks for public comments features a highly visible button for the public to do so. For those unfamiliar with how the government formulates and implements new rules and regulations, the site also offers tutorials, articles from academic contributors, and access to government document librarians. The new Federal Register goes beyond information about government rules. It is an exercise in citizen engagement.   It helps people easily participate in government and collaborate with federal officials by offering their views of proposed rules—all in a transparent, open setting so vital to a democracy. Since its' launch it has had more than 10m page views and 5.2m visitors just this year.

 So, that's a snapshot of the social media landscape from where I sit. Thanks for your interest. And I hope you will be following us on the social media platform of your choice!