

Social Media Week: How social media has already changed the way we talk to governments

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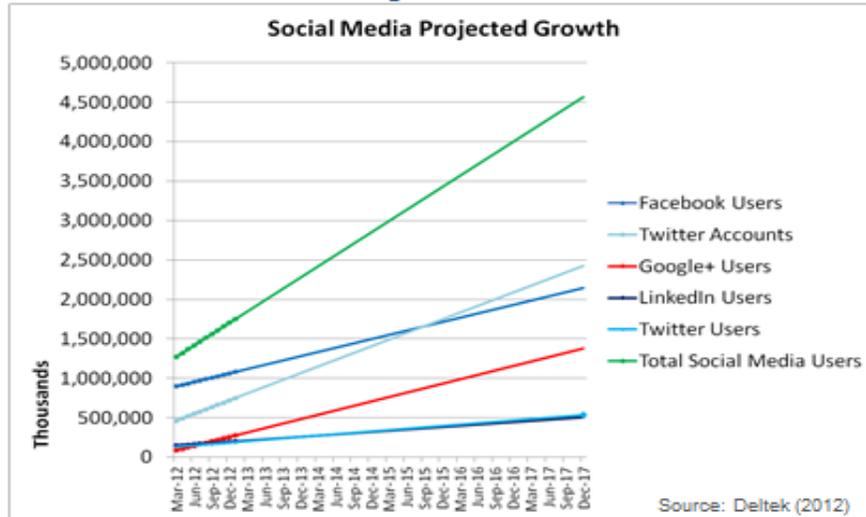
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Back when I worked in Washington D.C. at a nonprofit that doled out best practice policy advice to state and local government leaders, part of my job was researching and answering questions from our members. Oftentimes a week would not go by without a city manager or department director asking about social media. Sometimes they asked what the best platforms were to use; other times they wondered about **standardized practices and guidelines** or legal and ethical pitfalls. Some wondered whether it was even appropriate for governments to be communicating in real time on Facebook or Twitter. Most of the time, they just wanted to use social media to better communicate with their citizenry. As one member put it to me: “In order to speak to the people I serve, I have to go to where they are. And social media is where most of my people are today.”

This powerful need for governments to gravitate toward Web 2.0 tools – even when they don’t fully understand how or why – has stuck with me as I’ve moved to the IT contracting intelligence market. It’s a powerful illustration of not just the need for governments to keep up with the technological habits of their citizens, but also how it can act as a catalyst for rethinking the way we interact with our civic leaders and vice versa. It also shows that there is still plenty of room for experimentation, creativity and selling in the private sector when it comes to integrating these tools into the IT arsenal of agencies, universities and policymakers.

Social media as a portal for G2C interaction

Social Media Projected Growth



9 June 21, 2012

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GovWin IQ
from Deltek

Source: "Social Media in State & Local Government: A New Paradigm for Engagement and Innovation", Deltek 2012

By now it is no secret that one of the best ways to use social media in government is G2C, or government-to-citizen applications. As a direct communication or public relations tool, these apps can only be so distinct from the information presented on a government's Web page or a written press release disseminated to newspapers. **As a Canadian government official asked** while delivering a speech last year on the potential of the medium: "How are ... social media and interactive websites changing how public institutions conduct their business? Is the change profound or are we just replicating the use of traditional media on new platforms?"

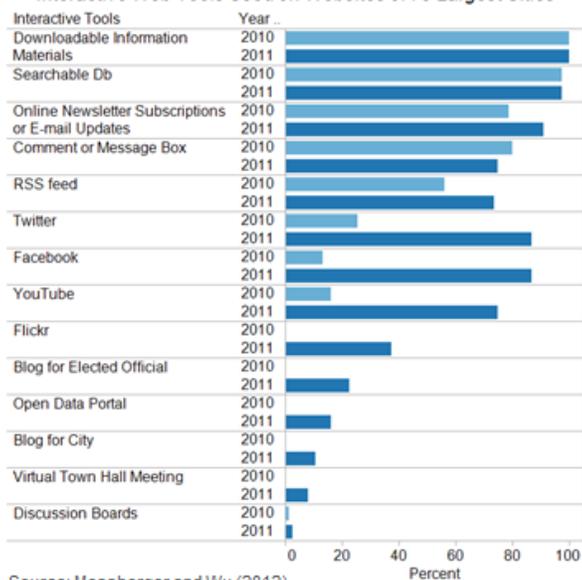
Where the technology really distinguishes itself is through its ability to coordinate real-time, citizen-produced updates to their government in order to coordinate more efficient action on a range of issues or problems that plague every city, county and town across the country. Larger cities or states with sophisticated or well-funded budgets might want to emulate the **U.S. State Department's CO.NX program**, which connects users to officials through Web and video chats on a range of public policy issues. It would not be difficult for states to model and merge a program like this into their existing 311 call center technologies to provide a wider range of services relying on online interaction. San Francisco, Calif., currently integrates several **social media platforms into its 311 system**, providing citizens an easy and familiar portal to submit a help request when they may have no idea who to contact about a downed tree outside of their apartment.

The spread of social media over the past 10 years has proven to be exponential. **A pair of University of Illinois studies on local government social media use** found a dramatic increase in government-to-citizen interaction from 2009 to 2011.

"The change in social media adoption is remarkable - increasing from two to five times over the levels observed two years ago," according to the authors. The integration of popular sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube into government operations increased from 250-600 percent.

Social Media Use in Cities

Interactive Web Tools Used on Websites of 75 Largest Cities



Source: Mossberger and Wu (2012)

Source: "Social Media in State & Local Government: A New Paradigm for Engagement and Innovation", Deltek 2012

- Use of interactive website tools, including SM, grew substantially from 2009-11.
- City government is turning increasingly to engagement and interaction with citizens via the Web vs. just providing information.
- SM use by cities has the highest growth rate of all interactive tools.
- Twitter and Facebook had more than 86 percent use by large cities in 2011.
- All website interactive tools can be integrated with SM.
- City government SM growth and desirability strengthens the case for SM solutions or SM inclusion in solutions.

Of particular interest to government contractors should be the rise and relatively untapped potential of open data portal technology. These portals often need to be customized to fit an individual government or agency's information-sharing needs, and thus cannot always be purchased off the shelf or adapted from available (and free) social networking applications. Oftentimes governments will need third-party expertise to design and integrate these portals into their existing IT infrastructure. Making this information easily accessible and user friendly to those outside of government is crucial to the growth of this technology, something that policymakers who have spent a lifetime in government may not be best suited for.

Of the 75 largest U.S. cities included in the University of Illinois study, 12 reported the use of open data portals in 2011. That is a large jump from several years earlier when such portals were almost unheard of in local government; vendors can expect this trend to increase exponentially over the next five years throughout large and small state and local governments.

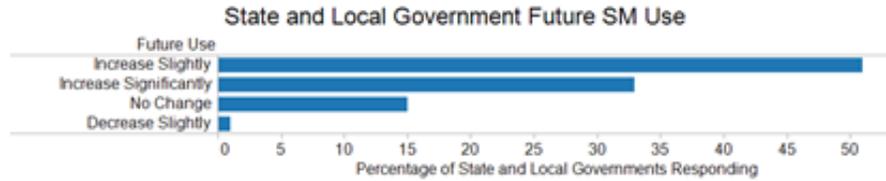
Still, we are just scratching the surface when it comes to the potential of G2C to meet the unique needs of state and local government. According to State Tech Magazine (which has a [treasure trove of local government social media infographics](#) that I cannot recommend highly enough), smartphone users will download more than **76 billion apps in 2014, and the app industry as a whole is expected to generate \$55 billion** of business by 2015. That graphic also does a fantastic job of showcasing some of the more innovative state and local G2C apps in the country, from the Sacramento, Calif., app that shows users the results of a restaurant's latest food inspection; to Chicago's Taxi Share app, which pairs up users heading in the same direction; to the city of Sparks, Nev., which has a mobile app guide to local stores, restaurants, hotels and events. Other graphics display the effective use of [social media in public safety](#) (Did you know that social media evidence used for a search warrant is accepted in court 87 percent of the time?) and show how [big data analytic tools are changing the way governments approach and solve big challenges](#).

Social media use in emergency management

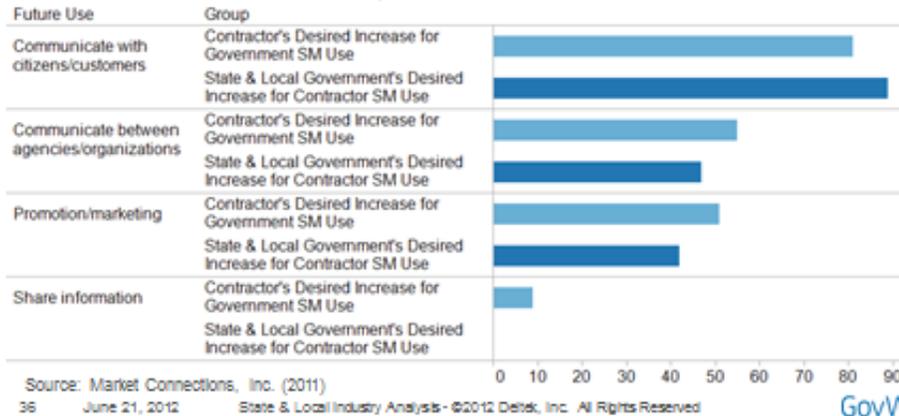
The other great early success of G2C interaction is in disaster and emergency management, where it has had a dramatic effect on how governments manage and coordinate their response to large-scale weather and public safety threats. Nowhere else is the ability to communicate back and forth between citizens and government more important than during a large-scale emergency, when traditional modes of communication **may be down or overloaded**. While social networking platforms are not entirely immune from these externalities, they do provide an excellent venue for micro-targeting a public safety organization's response and identifying as well as prioritizing resource allocation to ensure maximum efficiency.

Twitter has proven to be an especially effective tool to this end, both because of its popularity across demographic lines and its simplified setup. [According to a 2012 Pew report](#), Twitter usage among the ages of 18-44 range from 16-31 percent. That may not sound like much at first glance, but it is often more than enough people required to create an information "snowball effect" where advice and guidance can spread effectively throughout an affected population. That is also the age group most likely to be physically able to provide assistance to other citizens during an emergency. Think "pushing cars out of snow traps during a blizzard" or "going door to door to help evacuate elderly citizens in the aftermath of a flood."

State & Local Government Future SM Use



Desired Future Use of SM by Contractors and State/Local Government



GovWin IQ
from Deltek

Source: "Social Media in State & Local Government: A New Paradigm for Engagement and Innovation", Deltek 2012

Public safety organizations were among the first to realize the potential of integrating G2C communication into their operations, and it has changed the face of emergency response in some amazing ways. A 2009 report by the International City/County Management Association on [local government social media use during emergencies](#) illustrates the multitude of ways Web 2.0 has helped localities mitigate the damage of a disaster with both proactive and reactive examples provided. The report looks at a geographically diverse set of case studies by enterprising localities as they utilized Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Foursquare and text alerts to more effectively prepare and respond to floods, tornados, snowstorms, the H1N1 flu virus and other emergencies.

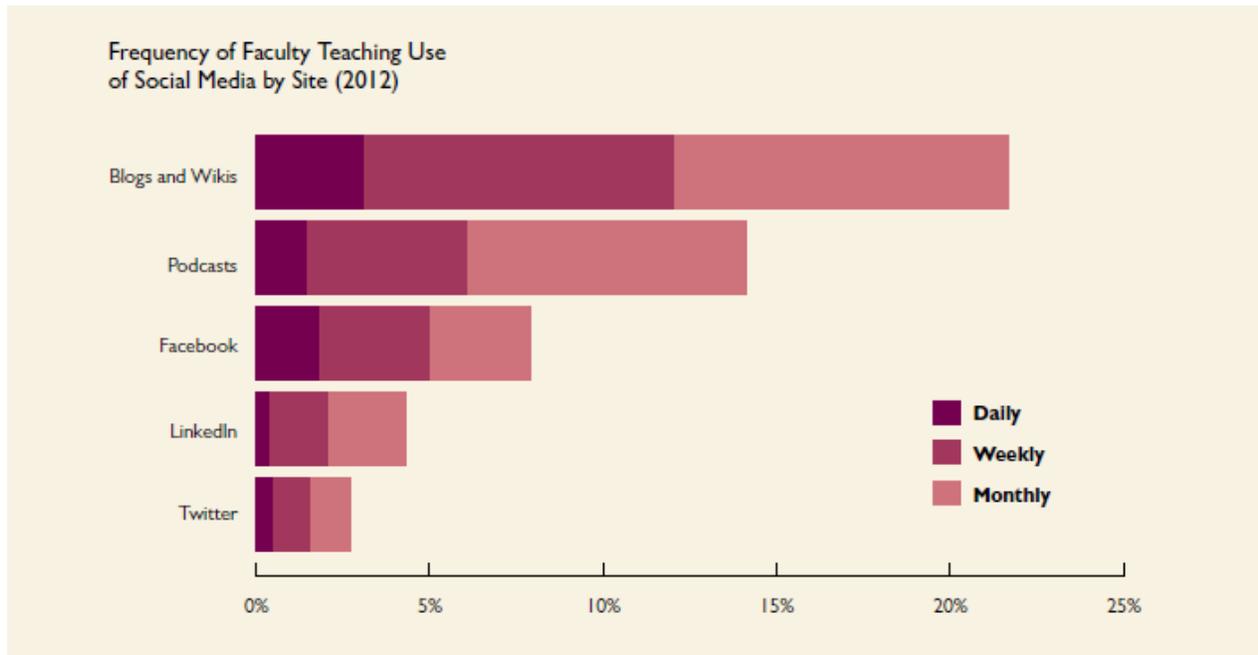
It is important to understand that the use of social media by emergency management and public safety agencies is not a one-way street. In addition to the G2C interactions, many public safety agencies provide forums on Twitter, Facebook, and [even Pinterest](#) to enable citizens to provide valuable information in a variety of areas. For instance, public safety agencies may receive information on emergency situations such as car accidents, robberies or other incidents that may leave the individual unable to make a phone call. Being able to tweet or send other messages to a public safety agency enables anyone to contact their local police agency, assuming they have a presence on social media.

For example, during Hurricane Sandy, the New York City 911 System was [completely overloaded](#) due to the receipt of 10,000 calls per *hour*. To put that in perspective, the city typically receives 1,000 calls per *day*. The use of social media tools during the hurricane skyrocketed with Instagram users posting 10 photos per second, leading a whopping 86,000 images in a 24-hour period. And this is just one of many social media sites.

This is not to say that these photos or other social media message directly saved lives, but the onslaught of information allows emergency management agencies to understand the who, what, when and where during an emergency. When citizens can directly engage with public safety agencies, those agencies may find it necessary to utilize social media tools. In March 2012, Deltek looked at the possible [rise of social media management software](#), which allows agencies to utilize social media for direct engagement with the community and to sift through information sent by the public. While this type of software system has not taken off across the country, it may become a necessity as more agencies utilize social media tools.

Social media use in higher education

[According to a 2012 Pearson survey on social media](#) by universities, nearly two-thirds of higher education faculty use social media on a monthly basis, and nearly half (45 percent) for professional purposes. When it came to social media use in the classroom, the number was significantly lower (a little more than one third), but in all cases there was a very strong age correlation, with younger professors reporting much higher rates of social media use than their older counterparts. This trend indicates that the overall proportion of professors and faculty incorporating social media into their curriculum should only increase as time goes on. Of the top Web 2.0 platforms used in class, blogs and wikis were the most prevalent, with podcasts and Facebook ranking second and third. Other popular platforms like LinkedIn and Twitter had very low usage rates, indicating that faculty has yet to figure out a proper teaching use for these sites.



As with governments, social media can also be utilized to great effectiveness during disaster or emergency management crises, such as severe weather or school shootings. After the infamous Virginia Tech shootings in 2007, a research group led by Leysia Palen of Educause [documented how social networking was integral](#) at disseminating information at almost every step in the immediate aftermath, from students using text and instant messaging check on the safety of their peers, to the use of IM and Facebook to spread breaking news to alumni and the outside world, to Wikipedia updates on the shootings just an hour after the university sent out its first emergency alert.

The result of all this social media activity, the authors argue, was a "distributed problem-solving" model that was "collective and bottom-up rather than orchestrated and top-down." This allowed lists that correctly identified victims to emerge online well before the university officially released that information. The study also examined 29 Flickr groups across six different disasters from 2004-2007, and found a distinct pattern whereby a few central accounts began rapidly aggregating images of the disaster as well as the accompanying media coverage, providing on-the-ground coordination and reporting that would be almost impossible to reproduce with Web 2.0.

The greatest potential for contractor involvement is with opportunities around social media management software and applications that can supplement off-class learning and virtual learning environments. As a range of technological trends converge over the next five years (virtual learning, BYOD, online universities), the need to connect teachers, students and resources all from one device will only accelerate. Social media and social networking functions already have permanence in the marketplace, and they will only continue to become more integrated with the way people, governments and education institutions communicate and disseminate information in the future.

For more information on this topic, download the free summary of the Deltek Report on **Social Media in State and Local Government** [here](#).

Or go [here](#) if you want to purchase the report in full.

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