Governing the Social Network: How U.S. Federal Department and Agency Records Management Policies Are Addressing Social Media Content

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Abstract

Federal agencies are making use of social media tools to share and exchange information with individuals and organizations that rely upon government services. As a result, federal departments and agencies are increasingly generating government records within these technologies. The National Archives and Records Administration has acknowledged the challenges of managing social media content, and has published a report on federal Web 2.0 use and record value, detailing some of the issues related to the management of Web 2.0 records within federal departments and agencies.

This study examines how executive departments and agencies are addressing records generated by social media by conducting a thematic analysis of federal records management policies. The study presents a framework to allow researchers, technologists, policymakers, and practitioners to understand the effectiveness of federal records management policies in addressing records generated by social media.

Research Questions

1. To what extent are selected federal departments and agencies addressing social media content within their records management policies?
2. If social media content is addressed in the selected federal department and agency records management policies, how is it being addressed?
3. To what extent do the policies reference the NARA guidance for managing Web 2.0 records?

Emergent Themes

- Level of detail of the policy
- Frequency of policy update
- Method of addressing specific technologies
- Inclusion of supplemental information on department and agency websites

Methods

Data analysis involved a qualitative thematic analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Records management policies were collected and reviewed to identify emergent themes, coded using an open coding process, grouped into conceptual categories, and the results were analyzed in order to draw conclusions and implications for records management practice within the U.S. federal government.

Data was collected between 3/27/11 – 4/10/11.

Examined records management policies and supporting information of all executive department and five largest independent agencies.

Five largest independent agencies were chosen in order to facilitate data collection, since larger independent agencies were more likely to possess a public facing website containing a records management policy and were more likely to have a social media presence.

Results

Records Management Policy Quadrants

Quadrant I: Level of detail and recent updates allow policy to address specific details of new technologies, as well as the most recent guidance.
- Most effective approach, though the approach may be difficult to maintain over time.

Quadrant II: Less effective because policies only address the management of certain technologies prevalent at the time of the initial publication or last revision, while newer (and potentially more prevalent) technologies are not addressed.
- Policies situated in Quadrant II are less effective than policies situated in Quadrant I, because supplemental information does not carry the weight of official policy.

Quadrant III: The existence or non-existence of recently updated supplemental information is an essential factor in determining the effectiveness of the policy in addressing social media content and NARA guidance. Less effective than policies situated in Quadrant I, because supplemental information does not carry the weight of official policy.
- Policies situated in Quadrant III are less effective than policies situated in Quadrant I, because supplemental information does not carry the weight of official policy.

Quadrant IV: These policies can not effectively address social media content and the NARA guidance without including a significant amount of supplemental information to provide the level of detail necessary to make the policy useful and accessible to staff in the agency.

Quadrant I
- Level of detail and recent updates allow policy to address specific details of new technologies, as well as the most recent guidance.
- Most effective approach, though the approach may be difficult to maintain over time.

Quadrant II
- Less effective because policies only address the management of certain technologies prevalent at the time of the initial publication or last revision, while newer (and potentially more prevalent) technologies are not addressed.
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Quadrant IV
- These policies can not effectively address social media content and the NARA guidance without including a significant amount of supplemental information to provide the level of detail necessary to make the policy useful and accessible to staff in the agency.

Conclusions

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