

State policymakers use social media to connect with constituents

Legislators turn to “virtual communities” to improve services

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When a professor at a regional Kentucky university gave inaccurate information about provisional ballots in the 2008 general election, Secretary of State Trey Grayson found out about it on Facebook.

He and his staff were monitoring the social networking site to keep tabs on the election. Some students at Western Kentucky University posted comments about the professor’s advice, and Grayson saw problems. Not only were the students’ votes not going to count — they were registered to vote elsewhere and couldn’t vote in Bowling Green, Ky. — but the precinct serving the college was running low on provisional ballots.

So the secretary of state’s office contacted the Warren County clerk, who is responsible for voting in the college town, and the professor to alert them of the problem.

“Without Facebook, without Twitter, maybe we don’t find out as quickly as we did in order to get everybody on the same page,” Grayson says.

That’s just one of the benefits Grayson has seen from using the new media, part of what many call Web 2.0, the next generation of Internet use.

Grayson isn’t alone. State and local government officials across the country are finding that sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter — with their interactivity and speed — are

reshaping government as we know it.

The use of social media among state policymakers was the focus of two sessions at CSG’s Annual Conference in November.

“This transformation [with the use of new media] has allowed government officials to relate and interact with their constituents in a very informal, frequent manner,” says Ben Self, a co-founder of Blue State Digital, which worked with President Obama’s campaign on the use of new media.

In a session called “Get Connected,” Self offered Annual Conference attendees insights and advice on how state officials can use new media to better serve the public.

In addition, Minnesota Rep. Laura Brod spoke as part of a panel of legislators who shared their experiences using blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other new media to keep their constituents informed and to run tech-savvy campaigns.

Starting a conversation

An informal survey by State News found five governors who use four of the five major social networking sites — Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube. And 21 others use two or more. Thirty-one states responded to the survey, which is online at <http://statenews.csg.org>.

“Governor [Deval] Patrick believes strongly in

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Rep. Richard LeBlanc
Michigan

the power of civic engagement — that government works best when citizens are invested and involved in government processes from beginning to end,” says Brad Blake, director of new media and online strategy for the Massachusetts governor.

Patrick is among the nation’s top “connected” governors — he uses four of the five major social networking sites, according to the State News survey.

That involvement is critical, Brod says.

“I just truly believe we are at a point in our history that people have got to pay attention because there’s a lot going on that impacts them and also impacts their future,” Brod says.

One way to get people to pay attention is to go where they are. “We’re creating ways of getting information to people in the online space where they already are,” Blake says.

Where they are is Facebook, which has more than 200 million active users, half of whom log on at least once a day, according to the Web site. They’re also on Twitter, which has between 4 million and 5 million users, according to Marketing Charts, an online publication covering marketing trends. And those numbers are growing.

“It’s a ‘no-brainer’ for a politician to use the new media,” says Florida Sen. Dave Aronberg. “You’re not going to be misquoted if you are the one sending out your own communication. It’s also a great way to engage the voters in a two-way conversation.”

Aronberg and Brod regularly tweet — the term used for the 140-characters-or-less message sent on Twitter — to share news from the floor when their legislatures are in session. That keeps their followers up-to-date on issues of the day.

But both legislators found the use of Twitter and other new media led them in other directions.

“I was using it as a messaging tool and then it morphed into a linking tool,” Brod says.

The medium allowed her to link to people who agreed with her, as well as those who disagreed. “It was a very effective way of creating debate around issues,” she says.

Aronberg says this tactic widens his exposure to dissenting opinions. “I don’t want to hear only from people who think like I do,” he says.

Spotlight: Michigan Rep. Richard LeBlanc

Michigan Rep. Richard LeBlanc was first introduced to Facebook in 2007, when a colleague mentioned the social networking site.

“I said, ‘Oh yeah? What’s that?’” recalls the Democrat from Westland.

So at his next event for young people, LeBlanc decided to see what all of the fuss was about. He started his speech by asking how many people in the room had a Facebook profile.



“Darn near every hand in there went up,” he says. “The light bulb went on and I said I would have a page up by 7 p.m. that day.”

Today, LeBlanc has more than 2,800 “friends,” many of whom live in his community. He uses his page as a way to connect with those people, creating a virtual community similar to an online town hall.

On LeBlanc’s page, people share their opinions — both positive and negative — on particular votes or issues that are important to them.

For example, when Michigan legislators passed a statewide indoor smoking ban last month, LeBlanc received feedback on his Facebook page about his position on the issue.

“It’s a great barometer of how people are feeling,” he says.

In addition to giving his constituents one more way to contact him, LeBlanc says, the site offers him a good way to filter information. He can, for example, see where a user is from — and if they live in his district, he is much more likely to take their comments into consideration. He finds this method preferable to the hundreds of form e-mails he gets each week, which are time-consuming to read and respond to. What’s more, they don’t allow him to interact with the people he serves because many are computer-generated letters sent through advocacy Web sites.

The tool also helps LeBlanc use his time wisely, because he can log on for five to 10 minutes each day, and see comments from a variety of people.

“It allows me to have contact, or potential contact, with many members of our community at the same time,” he says.

Though LeBlanc considers Facebook a useful tool, he points out that it’s only one way to connect with his constituents.

He always tells them, “I’m listed in the phone book, and I have been for 35 years. Call me.”

Tools help get the message out

While that interaction in a new type of public sphere is important, government officials are also finding that new media gives them the opportunity to get their message out to many more people.

When Grayson, Kentucky's secretary of state, launched an online program to allow anyone in the state wanting to start a business to file the paperwork through his Web site, he promoted it in the traditional media — garnering some print and radio coverage — and in new media using Facebook and Twitter. In just a few months after launch, more than 20 percent of eligible filings were made online, he says.

Grayson primarily credits the new media for that adoption rate.

Blake from the Massachusetts governor's office says the media landscape is shifting and that people who may have previously gotten their news through the traditional media — newspapers, television and radio — are now going online for news.

Social-networking sites give information specifically to those who want it: those friends or followers tuned in to specific officials. And those officials often offer followers a choice in the way they get their news. Washington Attorney General Rob McKenna, for instance, maintains a blog, as well as Twitter and Facebook accounts. He also posts videos regularly on YouTube, often about the consumer protection services his office provides.

"People like to consume information by video as well as by text," he says. "I think there's no question the public is better informed because there are so many more tools at our disposal."

Those tools, for the most part, are free.

"We don't have any spare dollars, so the ability to use Twitter, Facebook, e-mail, the Internet, to get our message out is huge," says Grayson of Kentucky.

And while the tools are technology-driven, they're not difficult to pick up, says Brod, who admits she's "not overly technologically adaptive."

Nor should the new media be considered simply technical or "Web stuff," says Blake.

"These are pretty major cultural changes, not simply technology issues," he says.

"[Twitter is] a tool I can use so people can see me as a very well-rounded, but very busy and very normal, individual."

Rep. Laura Brod
Minnesota

Status updating: Who's using it?

Nearly 20 percent of Internet users say they use Twitter or another service to share updates about themselves with others, according to a survey completed in October by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

That number has increased by eight percentage points since December 2008, when 11 percent of Internet users reported using a status-update service.

As with many other forms of social networking, people ages 18 to 44 are far more likely to use Twitter or another status-update service.

The median age of a Twitter user is 31, compared with age 26 for MySpace, a social networking site. The average age of Facebook users is now 33, up from 26 in May 2008, according to Pew.

Twitter has seen a significant increase in use over the last year, with total traffic going from about 2 million unique monthly visitors in December 2008 to more than 17 million in May 2009.

Blake works, for instance, with the governor's press office to use Twitter to get messages out, and with the constituent-services staff to answer questions from Massachusetts residents.

"It's not about the technology at all," he says. "It's about what you do with it."

Getting to know you

Aside benefit of social media is that constituents see an elected officials as a person and not just as a legislator or secretary of state or attorney general.

Brod says she mixes in personal tweets with legislative news. "For me, it's also a tool I can use so people can see me as a very well-rounded, but very busy and very normal, individual," she says. "Sometimes I think people think state legislators do nothing other than legislate."

But painting an accurate picture requires an authentic interaction — that means

the named sender, not an intermediary, has to send the message, says Aronberg.

"People want to see their elected officials as real people and not as staged candidates controlled by pollsters and spinmeisters," he says.

But even that requires some personal vetting

Percentage of online adults who use Twitter or another status-update service (Sept. '09)

Sex	
Men	17%
Women	21%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	19%
African-American	26%
Hispanic	18%
Age	
18-24	37% (up from 19% in December '08)
25-34	31% (up from 20%)
35-44	19% (up from 10%)
45-54	10% (up from 5%)
55-64	10% (up from 4%)
65 and older	4% (up from 2%)
Education	
Less than high school	18%
High school diploma	17%
Some college	21%
College graduate	21%
Household income	
Less than \$30,000	22%
\$30,000-\$49,999	21%
\$50,000-\$74,999	20%
\$75,000 or more	20%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project

of information.

Grayson once commented on the play of a University of Kentucky basketball player during a loss by the Wildcats. That created a "Twittergate" controversy of sorts, he says, and made national news.

"I expressed an opinion as a fan and forgot I'm secretary of state," he says. The incident was a good reminder that an official is always an official when he's making comments, says Grayson. "It was a reminder that my opinions might matter a little bit more too," he says.

That in itself may show the power of these social media, and the importance they may play in government, according to Self of Blue State Digital. And those still holding out need to get past their hesitation, he says.

"You can do it now or you can do it later, but you're going to have to do it someday," he says. "It's just about getting over the mental stumbling block of doing things a little bit differently." ★

Spotlight: Illinois Rep. John Fritchey

Illinois Rep. John Fritchey has always considered himself a "normal guy who has the privilege of being a legislator."

And Fritchey's blog reflects that style, giving his audience an even deeper view of who he is — a guy who wears jeans and baseball caps to his district office.



Fritchey started the blog, Open House, in 2005. The site has evolved into a conduit for Fritchey to share information with his audience, mostly regarding state politics and policy issues he faces every day as a member of the Illinois General Assembly.

The new technology is offering Fritchey a new way to reach his constituents — and hear back from them — which he says helps him do his job better.

"People absolutely appreciate an elected official being proactive in having open lines of communication," he says.

On any given day, Fritchey's blog posts can range in focus from his opinions on recent ethics reform legislation to what kind of music he's listening to. His real-time Twitter updates often

include quips about a funny experience he's just had, making his posts read like a rundown of his day.

That mix of serious commentary and levity is central to Fritchey's philosophy on new media.

"My approach from the beginning had been not just to say what's on my mind but to help give readers or followers a better idea of who I am," Fritchey says. "It helps humanize me."

Not everyone agrees with Fritchey's approach, but he says it works for him.

"Some political pundits might say that it's not smart and that I am being too candid," he says. "But the feedback that I get is that people appreciate the honest and open style."

The key to that style, he says, is the fact that Fritchey writes all of the content on his blog, as well as his Facebook and Twitter accounts, himself. He points out that when staff manage the content, it has the same effect as a rehearsed speech or a press release; that "canned" feel can contribute to a negative perception about politicians.

The bottom line, Fritchey says, is that public servants should take advantage of new technologies that can be tools for reaching people.

"It's free, it's easy and it's effective," he says.

Fritchey's blog can be found at www.johnfritchey.blogspot.com.