



EAC Roundtable Discussion

Voting Goes Viral: Using New Media to Manage an Election & Communicate with Voters

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EAC Offices
Suite 150
1225 New York Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC
www.eac.gov

Premise

There are a multitude of social media sources for information about elections and voting. In this rapidly moving, multi-source environment it is more important than ever that there are official resources about voting that the public can rely upon.

Goal

Host a discussion that will ultimately contribute to the public having official, credible, reliable and timely social media sources about elections.

Agenda

9:00 – 10:30 a.m.	Social Media: What Is It?
10:30 – 10:45 a.m.	Morning Break
10:45 a.m. -- 12 p.m.	Social Media: Who Uses It?
12 – 1 p.m.	Lunch Break
1 – 3 p.m.	Journalism and Social Media
3 – 3:15 p.m.	Afternoon Break
3:15 – 4:30 p.m.	Strategies & Stories from Election Officials
4:30 – 5 p.m.	Conclusion

Introduction

Social media are web-based, interactive tools and media that offer an engaging user experience. Outlets include Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Flickr. Users add value and their interactions can change the experiences of subsequent users. Social media differs from traditional media in both its speed and locus of control. Social media is fast and no one individual owns or controls the content that is being received and transmitted.

The voting public increasingly relies on information that is generated and exchanged amongst themselves, about elections, including the basics of how, where and when to vote. Candidates, parties and voting activists have their own strategic uses of social media. Social media outlets are the platforms in which information about elections is being shared and repeated.

Journalists and election officials share a common goal of informing the public about election procedures and election outcomes, and both groups are using social media to inform the public.

The roundtable will facilitate a discussion about the needs and responsibilities of journalists and election officials, which will help to promote a better understanding that results in the public receiving information about voting and elections in an accurate and timely manner. The forum will also provide an opportunity to discuss accuracy versus speed in elections reporting, which can be the cause of competing priorities between these two groups. Election administration is an increasingly complex environment – made even more so by the use of social media.

The public expects and deserves to have accurate and timely information about voting, and we have an obligation to provide information to them wherever they are. To begin, we will define social media, define who uses it and discuss its unique culture.

I. Social Media: What Is It?

The public increasingly relies on itself for information, and that is especially true regarding politics and elections. We share updates on phones, social media sites and through chats. We have conversations about the information, and we supplement the discussion. Our discussions are done in public and anyone can join in. Social media is here to stay, and it is a source of information for many voters.

Lee Rainie, Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life project director, delivers opening presentation: Overview of Pew Internet Project Research After 2010 Midterm Election.

Discussion Questions

- a. Do you think social media sites like Facebook and Twitter impacted voter behavior in the 2010 election cycle? If so, how?
- b. It appears that social media is being used to exchange and share partisan information, but not basic information about voting, such as polling place locations or absentee voting rules. Is this generally true?
- c. Which social media outlet would be most conducive for sharing election administration information? Why?
- d. Can you discuss how social media has impacted the public's expectations regarding official government information?
- e. Are government organizations in general and election administrators in particular, riding the wave of social media, or has the wave passed them by? What are the risks associated with each of these conditions?

II. Social Media: Who Uses It?

An important point to make about social media is that it is not a technology; it is a culture. And, yes, it can be scary and unfamiliar to some of us. However, we have to remember our goal – serving voters. They are on Twitter. They use Facebook. And we have a responsibility to go where they are and make sure they have reliable, credible information about exercising their right to vote. Remember, using social media is not about getting a return on your investment; it's about having conversations with the people you work for. It's about collaboration, interaction and it is the way business is being done.

Dana Chisnell of Usabilityworks.net will discuss the human element and culture of social media.

Discussion Questions

- a. I think that many of us are under the impression that the social media audience is mainly young - Is this true and if so, why do you think that is the case?
- b. Why do you think some government officials are reluctant to join the social media world?
- c. What role does plain language play in the social media world? And how do government officials balance professionalism with a more conversational atmosphere?
- d. Are there issues similar to email, in which tone or intent can be misunderstood on a tweet or a Facebook posting?
- e. How do election officials establish credibility on social media sites?
- f. There are discussions on social media about complex and varied modern voting systems. I wonder if it is possible that all of us are using the latest technology to discuss and report on voting technology that we don't understand?
- g. Have standards for ethical use of social media lagged behind its proliferation? If so, is this a concern?
- h. Do contemporary open records request (or FOIA) standards, properly contemplate the use of social media?

III. Journalism and Social Media

Journalists and election officials share a common goal of informing the public about election procedures and election outcomes. In an era of dynamic changes in voting technologies, increased voter expectations and reduced budgets, journalists and election officials need to find common ground and explore ways to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of communicating critical election information to the public. A natural tension between these two groups has been speed versus accuracy regarding unofficial election results. I wonder if the emergence of social media has exacerbated this tension.

Chuck Todd of NBC speaks.

Discussion Questions

- a. Do social media change the basic dynamics of reporting election results? Are speed and fewer words the only differences?
- b. When contests are close, recounts will attract more attention than the contests themselves. What issues do journalists who use social media face when covering recounts?
- c. For the journalists, many of your Twitter accounts state that a retweet does not equate an endorsement. What does a retweet signify? Would you retweet information about a problem at the polling place, such as long lines, without verifying the information?

- d. What role does the practice of having at least two sources play in the social media world?
- e. Presidential elections after redistricting have both high public interest and high probability for drama. What should the media's "homework" assignment be to prepare for coverage of the 2012 cycle? What information should election officials share with the media in advance of the election?
- f. Is there an opportunity for individuals to use (or misuse) social media in an attempt to subvert traditional media accuracy and deliberation? If so, how do journalists address this practice?

IV. Strategies and Stories from Election Officials

The social media environment is fast-paced, unforgiving and can be cruel. If you enter it, you will make mistakes, big and small. It's important to develop a strategy, but also be confident enough to experiment. At the end of the day, election officials should always remember that these efforts are being undertaken on behalf of the public. You want to make sure they have accurate information about how to successfully cast a ballot. Get ahead of rumors and take advantage of this built in early warning system. Get unfiltered feedback, which all true leaders want. It may get weird out there, and it is normal to be scared, confused and excited. But you are helping more people and you are accomplishing your mission.

Alysoun McLaughlin of DCBOEE speaks.

Discussion Questions

- a. The 2000 presidential election was a wake-up call: nothing has been the same in elections since. What changes has your organization made as a result of the increased scrutiny of the media and the insatiable appetite of the public for instant coverage and analysis of election snafus?
- b. Does your election office have a communication officer, or a staff member assigned to perform this function? What role will these individuals play in the coming elections, especially in regards to social media?
- c. What are the elements of a successful social media policy?
- d. Are press releases and media kits passé? How do you get information to the public?
- e. Regarding Twitter, does your office distinguish between "following" and "retweeting"? If so, how? How do you decide who your friends will be on Facebook?
- f. Consider your communication priorities in the 2000 (or 2004/2008) election. Have those priorities changed? Where is social media management in your priority list?

V. Closing

- a. What advice would the media give election officials regarding improved strategies for accomplishing our common goals: good elections and good reporting? What advice would election officials give the media?