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How Social Media Is Reinventing Government

From flash mobs to Twitter town halls, social media is changing how citizens communicate, interact and mobilize—reinventing the everyday work of government and public service management. The era of the digital citizen has begun. And there is no turning back.

Welcome to the digital revolution

Following world news today, it is hard to ignore the impact of social media as a springboard for citizen-powered change. Not only are people getting their news from social media, but social media is the news.

Consider the Arab Spring. From Egypt to Libya, North African and Middle Eastern governments fell. In large part, social media tools ignited and channeled these widespread movements for change. This e-revolution transcended class, gender, political and national boundaries as it spread. Much of the reporting around these events focused on social media—and even looked to social media for on-the-ground perspectives, instantaneously translating local human stories into international news.

The legacy of the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement offers an important lesson for governments. Social media and Web 2.0 technologies turn everyday citizens into digital citizens. With convenient, accessible technology tools, digital citizens have instantaneous channels to speak, connect and act.

The unsung impact of the digital citizen

Digital citizens will continue to impact politics and government at watershed moments. However, digital citizens will also have an equal—if not greater—impact on the everyday work of government and the delivery of public services. This story may not make the political blogs, the nightly news, or the history books, but the digital citizen will forever change daily government operations.

In fact, the Accenture Digital Citizen Pulse Survey of citizens in seven countries reveals that the majority would use digital services offered by government, especially for routine transactions. Moreover, 51 percent of respondents believe that the ability to interact digitally with government would encourage them to be more engaged with government.

This is also a story that may sound familiar to government IT observers who remember the early days of e-government. The discussion then centered on the potential for e-government—from static websites to interactive portals—to change the relationship between governments and constituencies. And it did.

What's different—and compelling—about digital citizens is how they can initiate and dictate the dynamics of the citizen-to-government relationship like never before. This is because digital citizens can assert expectations of government and create a groundswell of support so powerful that the need for a response is clear.

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The central question for government then becomes: How must government change to better relate to digital citizens? There are already key lessons to consider:

Time is precious
Time is a valuable currency in the digital world. Digital citizens can make an impact at lightning-fast pace, and they will come to expect the same of government. In 2011, thousands of young people in Spain protested against mass unemployment, austerity measures and political corruption. The movement started as a flash mob in Puerta del Sol in Madrid on May 15, 2011 and spread quickly. Election turnout just days later was significantly affected. The ruling socialists suffered their worst electoral defeat in more than 30 years.

Go where the people are
Digital citizens are all over social media. Governments must be there too to connect with them. This lesson was put into action during the 2008 presidential elections in the United States. It is widely thought that then-candidate Barack Obama's success in fundraising and voter mobilization reflected his team's smart use of the Internet, particularly in connecting with younger voters. Once elected, President Obama became the first U.S. president to hold a Twitter town hall. Social media is mainstream, and governments must develop social media savvy to interact with people and use them as sources of feedback and innovation. It will be key, however, to determine the right, citizen-relevant use of this channel. When asked about their use of social media to connect with government, 51 percent of survey respondents said they are not opposed to using it to contact a government official to request a service or resolve a problem.

Open government is opening up
Public entrepreneurship is emerging as a key theme in government. Already, governments have started to open their data, processes and delivery to enable new forms of citizen involvement and business development. It's a move that recognizes the symbiotic relationship between social media and government transparency. The United Kingdom and Denmark, for example, have integrated a raft of public data at one place for citizens to participate in decision-making processes. The challenge here is the effective management of public engagement, and the linked issue of how to make best use of new technologies in government IT initiatives.

Change starts with the power of one
Social media is unlikely to fully substitute for activity in the physical world—at least for now. And only time will tell what the true longevity of this channel is and how its use will transform over time.

What is clear is that when delivering public service solutions and services, governments must consider the right channels to use to interact with and conduct business with citizens. Access issues, cultural norms and government resources will all play a part in this progression.

In addition to developing digital channels, in-person and phone channels will still be of importance. When asked their preferred future channels for interacting with the government, 60 percent of survey respondents still would prefer to speak to someone in person or over the phone to resolve an issue. Yet governments must understand that with a laptop and an Internet connection, an everyday citizen is a digital citizen. And the world is at his or her fingertips.

About Accenture
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