



# PUBLIC AFFAIRS BLOGGING

---

## WHY PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICERS SHOULD COMMENT OFFICIALLY IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

*A Mind & Media white paper by Jill Nienhiser, Kristal Farmer, and Aldo Bello.*

Ultimately, Federal agencies have two choices when it comes to the blogosphere. They can ignore it, or they can embrace it. To ignore it is to allow inevitable conversations to continue without their contribution, which can fuel disinformation. To embrace it is to take ownership of these conversations and to ensure that an agency's or office's efforts and perspective are expressed with intelligence and accuracy.

From a public affairs perspective, Federal agencies and organizations must:

- Recognize the reach and resonance of blog-driven online conversations
- Create and moderate their own organizationally appropriate messages via blogs in an *official* capacity
- Increase their participation in others' existing blogs, continuing conversations via blog comment features, again *in an officially approved capacity*.

*Properly moderated, blogging and blog participation turns personnel into advocates who can speak to mission success, respond to critique, and drive dialogue.*

Now is an ideal time for Federal offices and agencies to consider the benefits of blogging and blog-comment participation, particularly for public affairs personnel. With proper guidance, blogging and blog participation turns personnel into advocates who can speak to mission success, respond to critique, and drive dialogue.

This whitepaper explores:

1. Benefits of blogging in the public sector
2. Overcoming organizational discomfort with blogging
3. Blogging guidance for Federal agency/office personnel

## Benefits of Blogging in the Public Sector

In a recent survey by Melcrum Publishing, Ltd., “when internal communicators were asked about the top two perceived benefits of social media for their organization, 71% selected ‘improved employee engagement,’ 59% said ‘improved internal collaboration’ and 47% chose ‘creating a two-way dialogue with senior executives’.”<sup>1</sup> It’s not only internal communications that can benefit, however. Here are several specific, important ways that blogging benefits an organization’s external communications.

### *Increases Public Awareness*

Blogging allows you to **promote public awareness** of your organization generally, as well as market specific initiatives and events. As a primary source of information and insight for prospective employees, clients/partners, and the media, your blog can tell the “**real story**” **behind your organizational perspective and objective**. Additionally, **blogging makes an organization easier to see and easier to find online**. First, blogging keeps an organization **more conspicuous in search engine results**. Search engines index content more often when your site has regular blog postings. Secondly, when facilitated by subscribers who access content via RSS feeds, and by users of content aggregators such as Digg, Reddit, and StumbleUpon, blogs transmit new knowledge quickly and continuously.

### *Showcases Expertise/Thought Leadership*

A blog is a means for organizations to **showcase what its people know**. Multiple posters can **comment on current events, predict trends, introduce new concepts, discuss challenges, and celebrate solutions**. This gives the hosting organization tremendous credibility as a **thought leader**. Blogging shows that an organization is technologically and new media savvy, inclusive, fearless, and trustworthy.

### *Invites Open Communication*

**The best blogs invite participation and open dialogue**, providing a more immediate means for visitors to ask questions, share additional thoughts, and drive discussion and debate. If you ask readers what they think, invite feedback, and encourage comment and opinion, then readership—and awareness—will soar. Often, blog content is actually secondary to inviting these responses, to creating a forum where visitors feel their opinion is essential. Properly managed, **a blog with this intent becomes a powerful cultivator of interaction and opinion**. Sometimes, the resulting commentary a blog post produces is more interesting than the original message. This gives visitors a sense of ownership and increases blog traffic.

---

<sup>1</sup> Melcrum Publishing Ltd. “Social media is proving a big hit for global corporations inside and out, but risks remain.” Press Release, March 20, 2007. <http://www.melcrum.com/pdf/press/SocialMediaResearch.pdf>, accessed 25 FEB 2009.

## Encourages Transparency in Government

Recent political campaigns have used various web 2.0 strategies to reach to the American public. Blogging was so widely popular on the campaign trail that in March 2006, the Federal Election Commission recognized the Internet as “a unique and evolving mode of mass communication and political speech”<sup>2</sup> which in essence identified blogs as a form of media and exempt from campaign rules.

Then-candidate and now President Barack Obama pledged transparency in government so that the American public can not only know what is taking place in the legislature, but also offer feedback. According to *Federal Computer Week*, “Now a president is likely to set policies that move agencies well beyond a simple, static site and into the era of social networking”<sup>3</sup>—and the America public expects this. A survey released by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, as reported by the *Washington Post* shows that “51% of online Obama supporters expect to get e-mail, text messages, or other electronic communications from the new administration.”<sup>4</sup> It’s a natural progression we’ve seen over the past few presidencies. As former President Bush’s Internet director from 2005-2007 David Almay put it, “Clinton was the first Web president. Bush is the first digital president. Obama is the first online social networking president.”<sup>5</sup>

The new administration’s aim of keeping the American public well informed follows the trend of giving a warmer, human face to the government. This is seen with the launch in 2007 of “Your U.S. Government Blog,” in which six bloggers working in different areas of government gather to give daily tips and advice to the public.

“These are experts in Government information, because that's their job,” Godwin says, “But trying to translate that into [content] that matters in people's everyday lives is the challenge. We figure out what people are talking about and try to contribute, rather than forcing what we want to talk about on them.”<sup>6</sup>

The success of this blog is due in large part to the bloggers’ time commitment (each blogger posts once a week in addition to posts from guest bloggers), clear sense of purpose, and above all, personable tone. These are all important aspects of blogging that contribute to a highly successful blog.

---

<sup>2</sup> Federal Election Commission Memorandum. “Final Rules and Explanation and Justification for the Internet Communications Rulemaking,” Agenda Document No. 06-20, March 24, 2006. <http://www.fec.gov/agenda/2006/mtgdoc06-20.pdf>, accessed 25 FEB 2009.

<sup>3</sup> “Also in the News: Obama and Web. 2.0.” *Federal Computer Week*, Dec. 31, 2008. <http://fcw.com/Articles/2008/12/31/Also-In-The-News-Obama-and-Web-2.0.aspx>, accessed 25 FEB 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Vargas, Jose Antonio. “e-Hail to the Chief.” *The Washington Post*, Dec. 31, 2008; Page C01. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/12/30/AR2008123003518.html>, accessed 25 FEB 2009

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Aitoro, Jill R. “Keeping It Real,” *Government Executive*, 0017-2626, 12/01/2007, Vol. 39, Issue 21, pp47-48. Online at [http://www.govexec.com/story\\_page.cfm?filepath=/dailyfed/1207/120507mm.htm](http://www.govexec.com/story_page.cfm?filepath=/dailyfed/1207/120507mm.htm), accessed 25 FEB 2009.

## Challenges Stakeholder Perceptions

In the public sector, organizations are beginning to understand the ways that blogging and other social media can influence their stakeholders. A number of top military officers are embracing blogging and social media as a way of dialoguing with the people they lead. According to *The Christian Science Monitor*, General William Ward, head of US Africa Command; General Gene Renuart, commander of US Northern Command; Admiral James Stavridis, head of US Southern Command; and Admiral Thad Allen, commandant of the Coast Guard; are all using new media tools “to do something the military isn’t known for: creating more transparency to empower young military leaders and the public.”<sup>7</sup> Admiral Allen noted, “We need to understand that we are not living in the same social environment that we grew up in”—and he said this not in a press release or a memo but via a video blog on YouTube.com.<sup>8</sup> These leaders face challenges in moving into this brave new world, since the US military typically blocks its own computer networks from accessing of networks such as Facebook. These policies are sure to be reassessed as the value of the ever-expanding social media tools becomes more apparent.

In addition, the military is recognizing the importance of social media outlets on another critical group of stakeholders—their prospective recruits. This younger audience has in essence grown up with Myspace, Second Life, FaceBook, YouTube, and blogs. According to General James Cartwright, Commander of U.S. Strategic Command,

“There is an expectation on the part of the people that you bring into the organization that this is the way you're going to do business. And if American business, and the military and government don't understand that then you are also missing a critical attribute which is the expectation of your people to live in a world that is free of barriers.”<sup>9</sup>

The United States Air Force (USAF) has implemented policies not only guiding Airmen in the use of social media such as FaceBook and Twitter, but also **providing guidance for making official Air Force sanctioned commentary on blogs**. As Captain David Faggard, Chief of Emerging Technology at the Air Force Public Affairs Agency told David Meerman Scott of *Web Ink Now*, the Air Force Public Affairs’ goal is to educate all 330,000 Airmen in being effective online communicators for the Air Force.<sup>10</sup> One of their primary aims in this effort is to “counter blog,” which means to **counter negative opinions about the US government and Air Force in the blogosphere with factual, positive posts of their own**.

---

<sup>7</sup> Lubold, Gordon. “Military Brass Joins Wired Troops.” *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 JAN 2009, <http://features.csmonitor.com/innovation/2009/01/20/military-brass-joins-wired-troops/>, accessed 25 FEB 2009

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> IBM Center for The Business of Government, *The Blogging Revolution: Government in the Age of Web 2.0*, <http://www.businessofgovernment.org/events/blogging/>, accessed 25 FEB 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Scott, David Meerman. “The US Air Force: Armed with Social Media.” *Web Ink Now*, <http://www.webinknow.com/2008/12/the-us-air-force-armed-with-social-media.html>, accessed 25 FEB 2009.

## Overcoming Organizational Discomfort

Despite all these advantages, blogging remains uncomfortable territory for many Federal organizations. The biggest hurdle today for so many organizations, especially in the public sector, is concern that the organization's reputation will suffer because it is inviting public critique. As public affairs officers weigh the value of launching their own blog, they should keep the advantages in mind and realize that **they have far greater control over their blog-based messaging and commentary than they might initially imagine.**

*Agencies have far greater control over their blog-based messaging and commentary than they might initially imagine.*

To properly evaluate the appropriateness of blogging for your office, keep in mind that **blogging is about sharing information and that welcoming feedback is inherent.** Honesty in what is posted is essential; be advised that the resulting feedback may also be disarmingly straightforward. Of course, there are common-sense guidelines any intelligent organization will want to follow when it allows personnel to blog or invites public blog comments. Rules regarding appropriateness of subject matter, profanity, and slander/slur are essential. Overarching these concerns, however, is straightforward trust. Organizations must allow blogging, and then trust their personnel to blog appropriately.

Regardless, however, **the agency hosting the blog always has control of the posted content** and the ability to approve or disallow public comments before they make into the public eye. The advantages inherent in blogging are worth the effort to police content and feedback. Technology makes blogs very

*The advantages inherent in blogging are worth the effort to police content and feedback.*

easy to moderate. Any internal organizational blog will be moderated by a supervisor who will always make sure that posted content and resulting comments adhere to an organization's definitions of appropriateness.

Once agencies understand the level of control they possess, they become much more amenable to the idea of hosting their own blog and are ready to realize the specific impact that can have on the public sector. Then, once comfortable with the controlled

environment of their own blog, organizations can become more comfortable responding to commentary in the larger blogosphere in an officially approved capacity.

## Blogging Guidance

With blogging so widespread, and with so many advantages to both hosting a blog and commenting officially on other blogs, Federal agencies should establish sensible blogging policy to guide public affairs staff and agency personnel in general. This section addresses blog creation, participation, and moderation, and provides examples of effective blog policy currently in place at some government organizations.

### *Blog Creation/Participation*

While there is no universal policy applicable across all Federal offices, many agencies have established their own codes. This gives personnel the approval and comfort they need to fully engage with the blogosphere.

The National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), for example, specifies that all blog publications “must be accurate, fair, unbiased, and reflect positively on NOAA and the National Weather Service (NWS) and comply with NOAA Policy on Partnerships in the Provision of Environmental Information.”<sup>11</sup> Here, clearly, NOAA was able to apply existing communications policy to shape its blogging policy. Additional points emphasized by NOAA on the NWS Instruction documentation (<http://www.nws.noaa.gov/directives/>) include the need for blogs to be reviewed by the appropriate level of management who will ensure that topics are in sync with mission. Blogs must also be “predictable, reliable, and dependable. Once a blog is started, it must be regularly updated.”<sup>12</sup> Here, the organization is taking care to ensure that content is consistently kept up to date, an essential step for blog success.

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Office of Public Affairs (OPA) manages EPA’s “Greenversations” blog (<http://blog.epa.gov/blog/>). OPA encourages participation from staffers and requires their supervisor’s approval to write for the blog—which helps ensure the staffer has time to write, and that the supervisor is aware of the staffer’s contribution. Bloggers are given some guidance about the purpose and goals of the blog, and the preferred tone, language, length, and topics for posts. After providing this guidance, OPA does not edit employee-submitted posts, though they may go back to the employee with minor suggested changes. OPA also has their Office of General Counsel review blog posts before publication.

---

<sup>11</sup> National Weather Service. “RSS Feed Requirements and Specifications.” *National Weather Service Instruction 60-103*, May 25, 2006, <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/directives/sym/pd06001003curr.pdf>, accessed 25 FEB 2009.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

## Blog Moderation

Allowing (and moderating) comments on your blogs allows others to essentially endorse your reputation. It also demonstrates the vitality of your conversations, encouraging further audience participation.

This raises the question of how to handle the inevitable negative comments. Granted, those that are obscene, offensive, and otherwise inappropriate are simply left unapproved. They never make it into the public field of vision. Often, however, **comments that are critical or negative have considerable value.** They hold a mirror up to an organization or provide valuable points of view from an external perspective. Disregarding these types of negative comments would be a mistake. In truth, how an organization responds to negative comments can reveal positive organizational attributes.

A blog's tone often sets the tone for the resulting comments. The Transportation Security Administration blog "Evolution of Security" (<http://www.tsa.gov/blog>) launched its commentary in January of 2008 with a blog post detailing its comment policy. It does an exemplary job setting expectations:

*The purpose of this blog is to facilitate an ongoing dialogue on innovations in security, technology, and the checkpoint screening process. We encourage your comments; your ideas and concerns are important to ensure that a broad range of travelers are active and informed participants in the discussion. TSA reserves the right to modify this policy at any time.*

*This is a moderated blog. That means all comments will be reviewed before posting. In addition, we expect that participants will treat each other, as well as our agency and our employees, with respect. We will not post comments that contain vulgar or abusive language; personal attacks of any kind; or offensive terms that target specific ethnic or racial groups. We will not post comments that are spam, are clearly "off topic" or that promote services or products. Comments that make unsupported accusations will also not be posted.<sup>13</sup>*

Another popular Government blog, "Gov Gab" (<http://blog.usa.gov>) establishes an inviting, contributory tone – but not without setting down rigorous standards for commentary:

*We welcome your comments and expect that our conversation will follow the general rules of respectful civil discourse. This is a moderated blog, and we will only post comments from bloggers over 13 years of age that relate to topics on Gov Gab. We will review comments for posting within one business day. Bloggers are fully responsible for everything that they submit in*

---

<sup>13</sup> Transportation Security Administration (TSA). "Evolution of Security," Blog Comment Policy, <http://www.tsa.gov/blog/2008/01/comment-policy.html>, accessed 25 FEB 2009.

*their comments, and all posted comments are in the public domain. We do not discriminate against any views, but we reserve the right not to post comments.*<sup>14</sup>

Throughout these and similar examples, the theme of commentary tempered by civility qualifies blog comments and participation. It's important to point out, however, that while any hosting organization can police the content and commentary of its blogs, the user community quickly addresses dissenting and inappropriate comments with their own responses, creating a "self-policing" dynamic. As a blog becomes more popular, regular visitors develop that aforementioned sense of ownership, keep comments focused on post-relevant topics, and even take it upon themselves to respond to critique on the host.

### ***External Blog Participation***

Encourage your personnel to leave comments on blogs, but make sure those comments are shaped by smart policy. Blog comments made by your personnel on other blogs are great ways to **build visibility for your own blog and credibility for the contributors and commentators.**

Many organizations have external blogging/commenting guidance similar to their internal blogging guidance, but usually both are predicated on the idea that the staffer is not posting or commenting so as to represent the agency's or office's official stance on a topic. **Public Affairs Offices SHOULD establish official policy or guidance that allows Public Affairs staff to blog and comment on blogs in an official capacity, just as they would respond in newspapers, on television or radio, or in other traditional media.** This policy or guidance can be modeled on existing policy and guidance for other types of media.

*Encourage your personnel to leave comments on blogs, but make sure those comments are shaped by smart policy.*

Andrew Cohen, a Project Director for Forum One Communications (<http://www.forumone.com>) in Alexandria VA notes that, "The risk of not participating in the blogosphere is irrelevancy... Blogging is really just another publishing model. You can choose to adopt any set of blog components and blog guidance as suits the office's culture, priorities, and policies."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> US General Services Administration. "Gov Gab," Blog Policies, <http://blog.usa.gov/roller/govgab/page/policies>, accessed 25 FEB 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Personal email, 22 OCT 2008

## Sample Government Blogging Policies

Every government agency has different policies regarding blogging and whether/how their employees may comment on or host blogs. Some examples:

**Department of Health & Human services (DHHS)** policy states: “No DHHS employee shall maintain a blog that promotes their official capacity in the office, division or department, or provides any advice or guidance on behalf of the department, unless it is first approved by the division director and the Director of Public Affairs.”<sup>16</sup> Thus at least the potential is there for a DHHS employee to blog in an official capacity, as long as it is approved.

**US Coast Guard:** In 2008, an ALCOAST 458/08 was signed giving staff direction on dealing with social media. It essentially allows members to contact bloggers and correct them if they made errors in reporting. However, staff may only speak to “friendly” blogs, while negative or unfriendly blogs are ignored.<sup>17</sup>

**US Air Force (USAF):** Perhaps the most progressive example of a Government entity empowering their entire workforce to respond to commentary in the blogosphere is found in the USAF, as mentioned above. According to Captain David Faggard, their mission is to “use current and developing Web 2.0 applications as a way to actively engage conversations between Airmen and the general public” and their aim is to “counter the people out there in the blogosphere who have negative opinions about the U.S. government and the Air Force.”<sup>18</sup>

Air Force Public Affairs offers loose guidance for Airmen in the form of “Blog Assessment” flowchart (see the flowchart at the end of the *Web Ink Now* article, <http://www.webinknow.com/2008/12/the-us-air-force-armed-with-social-media.html>) that provides a decision tree for determining how (or whether) to respond to issues online. It offers guidance for handling anyone from “trolls” to “ragers” to “misguided” individuals.

---

<sup>16</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), “Web Standards for DHHS Public Websites,” <http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/redesignproject/webstandards.htm>, accessed 25 FEB 2009.

<sup>17</sup> ALCOAST 458/08, <http://www.uscg.mil/announcements/alcoast/ALCOAST458.txt>, accessed 25 FEB 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Scott, David Meerman. “The US Air Force: Armed with Social Media.” *Web Ink Now*, <http://www.webinknow.com/2008/12/the-us-air-force-armed-with-social-media.html>, accessed 25 FEB 2009.

## Conclusion

The value of allowing Federal agency and office personnel to both blog and comment on other blogs – in an official capacity – is that this allows the agency or office itself to claim control of its public affairs and public awareness messaging. Just as agencies and organizations routinely broadcast service announcements and updates via traditional media, decision-makers are recognizing that they must also step up agency presence in emerging online media.

A Federal entity that permits blogging and blog-comment participation, in an official, moderated capacity, has transformed its Public Affairs personnel into Web 2.0-enabled advocates who are well equipped to reinforce missions, address critique, and encourage dialogue.

### *Additional Blogging Insight & Guidance*

- The Blogging Revolution: Government in the Age of Web 2.0  
<http://www.businessofgovernment.org/pdfs/WyldReportBlog.pdf>
- Models of Government Blogging (SlideShare presentation, Manuel Perez)  
<http://www.slideshare.net/manuel.perez/models-of-government-blogging>
- Blogs from the US Government (active blogs from US Federal agencies)  
[http://www.usa.gov/Topics/Reference\\_Shelf/News/blog.shtml](http://www.usa.gov/Topics/Reference_Shelf/News/blog.shtml)
- “Blogs” from Webcontent.gov, “Your Guide to Managing US Government Websites”  
<http://www.usa.gov/webcontent/technology/blogs.shtml>
- Government Blogging—Best Practices & Tips for Success  
<http://www.slideshare.net/mikekujawski/government-blogging-best-practices-tips-for-success>



*Jill Nienhiser and Kristal Farmer are communication consultants and new media advisors with Mind & Media. Aldo Bello, Mind & Media's Chief Creative Officer, works with Federal clients to incorporate appropriate new media tools into their public awareness, recruiting and retention, and training efforts.*

*Mind & Media, Inc. is a full-service media agency in Alexandria, Virginia dedicated to addressing complex messaging challenges. Mind & Media specializes in developing training, awareness and recruiting initiatives that combine the most effective elements of traditional and emerging communications technologies. Our familiarity with the Federal marketplace makes it possible for us to translate these services and solutions to forward-thinking agencies and organizations ready to maximize the effectiveness of their print, broadcast, and online outreach. To have a more detailed discussion about blogging and the significance of online social networking, contact Aldo Bello at (703) 894-1020, or visit us online at [www.mindandmedia.com](http://www.mindandmedia.com), and complete the contact form under Contact Us.*