



The Complexities of
Government Blogging
in a Dynamic
Policy Environment

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If transparency, speed and forthright dialogue are the hallmarks of the Cluetrain economy, some may argue that government communicators have neither a clue nor a train schedule.

In broad strokes, most government efforts to communicate with the public can be characterized as slow, unresponsive and even leaden.

We're not talking about social marketing here – with a thick wallet and sufficient scientific evidence, governments can launch multi-channel consumer marketing campaigns that compare with the best of the CPG companies.

It's issues management that's spinning the wheels of steel on this riff, baby. Arguing the finer points of a longstanding policy on fisheries management, debating taxation policy, planning new major regional infrastructure projects. Historically, this sort of discussion has bounced around a very small group of core stakeholders, government policy analysts,¹ community and industry associations, lobbyists, non-governmental organizations, and think tanks.²

Their traditional channels of communication are well established: community town hall meetings; regular conversations about the technical working of legislation; industry/government working groups; specialist conferences; legislative committees; ostensibly consultative publications like the Canada Gazette³ and the Federal Register;⁴ and maybe a comped semi-luxe dinner in the corner booth (or the corner diner).

In recent years, email, private listservs and rudimentary online consultation efforts (including password-protected extranets) have begun to nudge their way into the mix.

That's the private face of public policy work: the public face is traditionally filtered through a communications/public relations apparatus that emphasizes the gate keeping of media enquiries, careful preparation of public messages and the control of outbound communications.





While not a twenty-first century model of communication, it has a sixty-year track record⁵ of (relative)⁶ success ensuring that large organizations present a united front on issues that are both fluid and sensitive. Maybe just as importantly, this model tries to avoid great embarrassment for the organization.

This is the old-school style⁷ of knowledge work: the world of professional relationships, long-standing and shared responsibilities on advisory bodies, experts talking to experts.

It's a world that is slowly opening to the activism of wired and more broad-based groups like Common Cause.⁸ Today's private sector policy analysts and issues activists are following a path beaten⁹ by groups like Greenpeace, the many Public Interest Research Groups,¹⁰ and even anti-nuclear activism by Quakers¹¹ in the 1950s.

But these groups are finding their government contacts – the policy analysts tasked to their common files – aren't ramping up as quickly to join social networks. They aren't as ready to throw their ideas out to sink or swim in various online pools of analysis, conjecture and debate.

This is a startling non-development for the private sector, which regularly discovers their software developers, marketing team, even warehouse guys, are posting smack on YahooGroups and bragging on BlogSpot. It's even more frustrating for the community leaders, think tank analysts and municipal politicians who have jumped on the bandwagon, downloading WordPress, distributing e-newsletters, hosting webinars and building an audience for their podcasts.

That said, all these electronic voices are having an effect upon the policy-making apparatus: just because policy analysts aren't blogging doesn't mean they don't have Bloglines accounts or haven't installed feed readers.





The slow pace of adaptation shouldn't be much of a surprise. Most government policy analysts face significant institutional barriers to a policy of wide-open contact and communication between their policy apparatus and the interested public: historic practices; organizational silos; legislated barriers to information-sharing;¹² personal reservations and technological hurdles.

Historically, many policy analysts have been trained to work within an established and rigorous process of information gathering, organizational debate and limited consultation with a long-established group of stakeholders and politicians.

Information usually flows to a larger public audience after these steps have been taken: still, traditional consultations on evolving policies may only include limited-distribution pamphlets/publications and an abbreviated series of public consultation sessions. Capping this process off is an extensive series of managerial, institutional and political approvals – all before a complete package of policy proposals can be fully and freely disclosed.

(Unless you're an intelligence analyst,¹³ in which case you're used to not sharing¹⁴ your work at all)

That said, we're all aware that every political process – democratic or not – includes the occasional leak, trial balloon,¹⁵ ghost proposal and speculation attributed to a "source close to ..." intended to move the policy process forward.

This well-fertilized landscape grows the manna that feeds many government beat reporters and blogs focusing on political commentary. There's a reason, though, that even well connected political operatives are loath to have their own names and reputations tied to these trickles of information.

Frequently, the policy process has become log jammed because of philosophical, practical or legal disagreements between stakeholders, organizations or politicians. Points of view can become entrenched in organizational silos –





and can only be dislodged through vigorous activism and pressure from third parties (like community activists, local representatives, labour executives or opposition politicians) communicated through the MSM and more targeted online and local campaigns.

Most significantly, many policy analysts (and most other government employees) feel some reticence to share information more widely, and especially in easily accessible formats like blogs. They're more reluctant than a Chinese activist blogger¹⁶ who's just been snitched on by Yahoo.

In many cases, there are legal obstacles to their releasing information. They could fear being accused of contempt of Parliament¹⁷ by making details of a legislative package public before elected officials have had an opportunity to read the package. More seriously, they could be subject to censure or penalties under an Official Secrets Act.¹⁸

Breaking any of these laws could lead to being dooced: it's arguable that no blog is worth losing your life's work. (Of course, their personal reservations against blogging might have something to do with having a full day's work, but we won't go there.)

The real obstacle to a more concerted blogging effort by government organizations may simply be technology: while blogging is gaining popularity among more than just early-adopters and teenagers, it is not a technology readily embraced by corporate IT staff.

Individual politicians continue to set up Typepad, Blogger and WordPress blogs, but the guys and gals in the server room still fret about maintaining a content management system (other than Lotus Notes) – especially one whose content could change dozens of times a day.

Their professional caution and complex institutional IT systems lead to public complaints¹⁹ about "... a government site with more navigation than





content, of which everything is as important as everything else (making nothing important) with crafty URLs and 'click here' links ..."

These are the practical hurdles to implementing a blogging solution at an organizational level: detailed standards and policies²⁰ to ensure all official languages are accommodated, constituencies are attended and accessibility standards are met. These necessarily lead to overweight navigation bars, virtual forests of logos, symbols and flags, and overly simplified text.

In other words, by design, content and static nature, the anti-blog.

Things will change. The portion of the policy analysis community working on e-government and e-commerce²¹ is already pushing for more adaptive and responsive systems. Governments, recognizing the stampede²² towards transparency and disclosure in the securities markets, are beginning to produce simpler, easy to read publications and explore vehicles for developing two-way conversations with their citizens. They're exploring tools for making public consultations²³ more accessible – especially online.

Prizing stability, reliability and vendor support, governments will likely embrace RSS, blogging and other models of social networks once the technology and their resulting groundbreaking communications models have been well-tested and are well-supported by big-name vendors (and big name management theorists).

All it really needs is one big-thinker book to energize a whole cadre of senior management to embrace the concept.





The opinions and statements contained in this essay in no way represent the positions of my employer, the Government of Canada.

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Additional resources

"Blogging in Government" Andy Budd,

http://www.andybudd.com/archives/2005/09/blogging_in_government/index.php

"Introduction to Transportation Policy Analysis: Focusing on Outcomes"

<http://www.ctre.iastate.edu/educweb/crp445/Introtopolicy.ppt>

"Participating in Federal Public Policy: A Guide for the Voluntary Sector,"

Voluntary Sector Initiative, [http://www.vsi-](http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/policy/policy_guide/policy_guide.pdf)

[isbc.ca/eng/policy/policy_guide/policy_guide.pdf](http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/policy/policy_guide/policy_guide.pdf)

"Toward a Model of Information Policy Analysis: Speech as an Illustrative Example" by Terrence A. Maxwell in First Monday,

http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue8_6/maxwell/

"The Role of Policy Analysis for Democratic Policy-Making" by Tadao Miyakawa,

<http://www.nira.go.jp/publ/review/2000winter/03miyakawa.pdf>

¹ <http://www.opm.gov/qualifications/SEC-IV/A/GS-POLCY.HTM>

² <http://www.ppforum.com/home-e.html>

³ <http://canadagazette.gc.ca/index-e.html>





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- 4 <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/>
 - 5 http://www.collectionscanada.ca/war-industry/05210101_e.html
 - 6 <http://www.news.uiuc.edu/gentips/03/06nixon.html>
 - 7 <http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/x8422.xml>
 - 8 <http://www.commoncause.org/>
 - 9 <http://www.straight.com/content.cfm?id=4802>
 - 10 <http://www.opirg.org/>
 - 11 <http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/archive/2005/August/14/edit/stories/05edit.htm>
 - 12 <http://www.cjc-online.ca/include/getdoc.php?id=1871&article=1404&mode=pdf>
 - 13 http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/Kent_Papers/vol1no2.html
 - 14 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A64444-2000Nov11?language=printer>
 - 15 <http://www.bartleby.com/59/4/trialballoon.html>
 - 16 <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0909/p01s03-woap.html>
 - 17 http://www.premiers.qld.gov.au/About_the_department/publications/policies/Governing_Queensland/Parliamentary_Procedures_Handbook/privilege/contempt
 - 18 <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/O-5/>
 - 19 http://www.andybudd.com/archives/2005/09/blogging_in_government/index.php
 - 20 http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/clf-nsi/index_e.asp
 - 21 <http://canadabusiness.gc.ca/gol/cbec/site.nsf/en/bg00106.html>
 - 22 http://www.calgarystampedeparade.com/celebrity_rodeo_clowns.htm
 - 23 <http://www.consultingcanadians.gc.ca/cpcPubHome.jsp?lang=en>

