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(i)   Social Media: Successes and failures
(ii)   Gathering user feedback from websites

Online Engagement: Gathering Feedback, Successes and Learning
Submitted by Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australia[1]

I. Introduction

1.   Web 2.0 presents challenges to some long held government practices and has the potential to fundamentally change the way government interacts with its citizens and vice versa. It is a key means for open government, engagement with citizenry, innovation and value adding to government information. Together, public servants and interested communities can work together online using Web 2.0 to address complex policy and service delivery challenges.

2.   This paper explores the use of Web 2.0 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), along with its successes and learning.

II. Background

3.   In 2009, against a backdrop of increased interest by governments worldwide in online engagement and potential use of public sector information, the Australian Government established a Government 2.0 Task Force. The work of the Task Force fell into two streams. The first related to increasing the openness of government through making public sector information more widely available to provide transparency, innovation and adding value to government information. The second was concerned with encouraging online engagement with the aim of drawing in the information, knowledge, perspectives, resources and the active collaboration of citizens wishing to contribute to public debate and life.

4.   The Task Force report "Engage: Getting on with Government 2.0" was delivered to the Australian Government in December, 2009. In May, 2010, the Australian Government released its response to the Report's recommendations. All of the 13 recommendations made in the Report, except one, had been agreed to by the Government. Recommendation 13, regarding tax deductibility for information philanthropy, has been deferred for consideration

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until it can be considered in the context of the review of Australia's Future Tax System and the research report on the Contribution of the Not-for-Profit sector.

5.   The key themes for Government 2.0, as seen by the Task Force, include:

a) Public agencies and public servants should engage more using the tools and capabilities of Web 2.0. Forming or joining existing community of interest around issues of relevance to Government policy, service delivery and regulation will help public agencies and their officers become more informed, responsive, innovative and citizen-centric;

b) Once public sector information is liberated as a key national asset, possibilities – foreseeable and otherwise – are unlocked through the invention, creativity and hard work of citizens, business and community organisations. Open public sector information is thus an invitation to the public to engage, innovate and create new public value; and

c) To seize the opportunities of Government 2.0, the existing public service culture of hierarchical control and direction must change sufficiently to encourage and reward engagement. Yet it must at the same time, stay true to enduring public service values and impartiality, propriety and professionalism.

6.   Open public sector information was achieved by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 2005 by making all ABS statistics on the Internet free of charge. In 2008, the ABS adopted the BY licence of Creative Commons for its statistics on the website, thus facilitating the reuse and re-purpose of ABS information, even commercially. The rest of this paper will outline ABS' experience, successes and learning on the other Gov 2.0 themes.

III.   Successes

7.   The ABS has been using social media in a Government 2.0 context, with mixed results. This section summarises ABS successes to date:

a) **ABS BetaWorks ᵀᴹ** is a sandpit environment and associated blog to collect feedback from clients on new web site designs and concepts for communicating statistics.

When consulting an audience, the ABS needs a cost effective way to collect views from key users and the Australian Public. ABS BetaWorks ᵀᴹ was originally an internal resource, aimed at obtaining feedback from staff. However it was identified that this was presenting a one-sided view and, as a result, BetaWorks ᵀᴹ was released as an external blog in July 2009.

This enabled ABS designers to invite anyone with Internet access to participate in discussion with each other and the ABS on prototypes, designs and concepts presented through the blog. One benefit was the rapid identification of a community of experts, and other interested individuals who willingly put forward their views authoritatively on a subject.

BetaWorks ᵀᴹ also allows all visitors to reflect on published submissions before submitting their own. With this information stored in an appropriately tagged

database, it then becomes very easy and fast to extract particular themes and ideas, processing the submissions and integrating them into future designs and concepts.

In 2011, BetaWorks ™ was acknowledged for its innovative community engagement when it was shortlisted as one of the three finalists for the prestigious Australian eGovernment Award.

b) **Communication and consultation blogs** – These are blogs established for the purpose of communicating ABS information or events, or to engage with users about ABS statistical plans or proposals. Examples of such blogs are:

   i. **Statistically Speaking** – Used initially to promote the Library Extension Program, this blog has been active for well over two years and is a key tool for activities relating to public libraries and interacting with librarians across the country. Currently being redeveloped, this blog is in the process of being extended to a broader community, to promote current ABS activities in local communities throughout Australia.

   ii. **Measures of Australia Progress** – This blog, published at the same time that the "Measures of Australia's Progress, 2010" suite of products were released to the ABS website, was purposed with gaining feedback from users of the product. Was output still relevant, are existing measures still appropriate, what measure gaps are there and what other outputs would customers and users like to see, were just some of the questions posed during the life of this blog.

   iii. **16th Series Review of the CPI** – This blog was published to support the second phase of the CPI review in Australia. The purpose of this blog was to seek further input on specific 16th Series issues and to seek input regarding gaps identified.

   iv. **Preview our Plans - Program Development** – Recently released, this blog has been used to promote an on-line survey that seeks input of ideas for what should be on the Census for 2016. Expected to be used into the future to explore elements and ideas put forward for consideration for inclusion in Census 2016.

   v. **Online Engagement During Conferences** – In September 2010, the second NatStats conference was held in Sydney, Australia, with the overall theme being "Measuring what counts: economic development, wellbeing and progress in 21st century Australia," which explored the drivers of economic and related social change that are shaping Australia's future development.

   In March 2011, the "Census | Beyond the Count" conference was held in Melbourne, Australia, a showcase event that explores the issues that matter to all Australians. The conference looked beyond the count to reveal what a difference the Census makes.

   In both conferences, ABS set up for the first time a conference Twitter account to allow conference participants to keep abreast of discussions in concurrent sessions, and non-participants to pose questions for the conference even though they were not physically present. Both conferences saw that the Twitter accounts were proactively maintained for these purposes. This experience shows that social media can add another dimension to online engagement by

conference and non-conference participants.

c) **ABS presence on Twitter and Facebook** – The ABS has created presences on both Twitter and Facebook using the name "ABSStats," and has been interacting with users on a more conversational level, for example, graduate recruitment and product releases. Facebook has allowed the ABS to connect with graduates by linking with the Web 2.0 channels that they use every day. Evidence and feedback to date indicate ABS is being seen in a more positive light and is being viewed as a progressive employer of choice.

The "@ABSStats" Twitter account was created as a push-only channel, using 3rd party systems to automate the conversion of our daily product release RSS feed to Tweets. Our strategy was to start by "pushing" messages and then add our own messages/voice later, rather than the other way around. As a result @ABSStats now has over 1300 followers and has started positively engaging by responding to user enquiries through this channel.

d) **Engaging the Community through Facebook, Twitter and YouTube for Census 2011** – In preparing for the next Australian Census of Population and Housing, to take place on 9 August 2011, ABS has included dedicated online channels for engaging the Australian public, including the use of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Indications to date suggested that the Web 2.0 tools contributed significantly to a positive census field staff recruitment outcome. The impact of these tools on the effectiveness of the 2011 Census will be assessed after the conduct of the Census.

e) **Improving Internal Communication, Engagement and Innovation** – Through introducing social media tools within the organisation, the ABS has empowered staff to better find colleagues with relevant expertise, collaborate on policies and operational matters, improve internal communication across existing silos and provide better outcomes for the Bureau. Also, in early 2010, many staff took part in the ABS-hosted Web 2.0 innovation competition, offering many good ideas to improve ABS processes, ABS delivery of products and services.

IV. Learning

8. **Proper governance –** To ensure coherence, consistency and effectiveness of social media strategy, it is important to have one single point of accountability in the organisation for the development and oversight in the implementation of online engagement within the ABS. Organisational acknowledgement and buy-in of this accountability is vital. Preferably the work of the organisation unit assigned with the responsibility for social media strategy should be overseen by a senior management committee.

9. **Online Engagement Does not Replace the Traditional Forms of Engagement –** It should be recognised that whilst social media provides another channel for engagement with citizens, it is by no means the only channel for such activities. It should therefore be recognised as complementary to, rather than, replacement of, traditional forms of engagement.

10. **Supporting Cultural Change** – With the exception of ABS BetaWorks TM and more recently Facebook/Twitter channels, ABS experience to date shows that there is still a low take-up rate in the use of online engagement by users. Equally, even though the Australian Government has made a declaration of open government, few ABS officers are engaging

online. The Australian Public Service Commission and ABS have developed guidelines to help staff who want to engage online.

11. **Proper Resourcing for Online Engagement** – Regular monitoring of blogs, moderation and feedback to bloggers, are essential for effective online engagement, and these need to be properly resourced. Guidelines are also needed for staff on how to monitor, respond, engage and moderate submissions. Social media interactions are generally provided as free text, so identifying effective methods to extract common themes and issues continues to present issues for the ABS.

12. **Assessing the Effectiveness of Social Media** – Whilst there is anecdotal evidence on the cost effectiveness of social media, more evidence and research is needed for an informed assessment.

V. Concluding remarks

13.   The ABS was using the Internet as a push mechanism to disseminate selected information to the public, deciding what information was provided, how it would be provided and how it could be accessed. Interactivity was limited to a telephone number and an email address that the public could use to get help or obtain further information.

14.   Web 2.0 offers an environment where the ABS and the public interact to make the best use of information and identify innovative and creative ways to use information to the benefit the ABS and citizens. This could have been missed without collaboration.

15.   It is important to get the balance of feedback from all sources, not just from the Web 2.0 channels. Other channels include the ABS web site, traditional media, interactions with key clients and secondary distributors. It is vital that whichever channel is used that resource is provided to allow prompt responses to be provided to questions and comments, in order to build a high level of trust from collaborators.

16.   The ABS is still relatively inexperienced in online engagement, but the learning from collaborative enterprises to date, such as BetaWorks [TM], is that the value add to the future of statistical communication far outweighs the discomfort such endeavours could cause.

VI.   References and Related Links:

1. ABS BetaWorks [TM]   http://betaworks.abs.gov.au
2. Facebook: ABS   http://www.facebook.com/absstats
3. Facebook: Census   http://www.facebook.com/pages/2011-Census-Australia/147985988548967
4. Twitter: YourABS   http://twitter.com/YourABS
5. Twitter: ABSStats   http://twitter.com/ABSStats
6. Twitter: 2011Census   http://twitter.com/2011Census
7. Twitter: BeyondTheCount   http://twitter.com/beyondthecount
8. Twitter: NatStats2010   http://twitter.com/NatStats2010
9. CPI Review Blog   http://blog.abs.gov.au/Blog/cpireview.NSF
10. Measures of Australia's Progress Blog   http://blog.abs.gov.au/blog/mapblog2010.nsf
11. NatStats 2010 Conference Blog   http://blog.abs.gov.au/Blog/natstats.NSF/
12. Census Beyond the Count Blog
    http://blog.abs.gov.au/Blog/beyondthecount.NSF/
13. Statistically Speaking Blog   http://blog.abs.gov.au/blog/statspeaking.nsf
14. YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/CensusAustralia
15. AGIMO Government 2.0 Primer   http://agimo.govspace.gov.au/primer-v1/
16. Government 2.0 Taskforce http://gov2.net.au/
17. Engage: Getting on with Government 2.0
    http://www.finance.gov.au/publications/gov20taskforcereport/
18. Government Response to the Report of the Government 2.0 Taskforce
    http://www.finance.gov.au/publications/govresponse20report/index.html
19. Declaration of Open Government
    http://www.finance.gov.au/e-government/strategy-and-governance/gov2/declaration-of-open-government.html
20. Moran Review into Australian Public Administration
    http://www.dpmc.gov.au/reformgovernment/index.cfm