



Blogging Government

Web journals enhance communication with constituents

By Mary Branham Dusenberry

Nearly 40 percent of Internet users read Web logs, online journals that deal with a range of topics. Some state government officials are tapping into this new communications tool to reach more people.

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exas Rep. Aaron Peña sits in a legislative committee room and listens to testimony about a death penalty bill.

His Internet blog is open in front of him, and an audience—also watching the public hearing on Austin public access television—offers comments and questions. It’s instant interaction

from people interested in the considered legislation.

“As this expert was saying things, people would comment to me—‘ask him this question’” Peña recalled. The legislator did, and the expert clarified his testimony.

That’s just one example of how blogs are reshaping government communications.

Peña is one of a small number of state legislators across the country who keep in touch with their constituents—and anyone else in the global village—through blogs, or Web logs—journals kept on the Internet.

The Pew Internet & American Life Project, released in July, found that 8 percent of Internet users, or 12 million adults, keep a blog, while 39 percent, or about 57 million American adults, read blogs, a significant increase since the fall of 2005 when Pew conducted a similar survey.

“It provides legislators with a way to not only get their issues and ideas and concerns out to constituents,” said Pam Greenberg, program principal with the National Conference of State Legislatures, “but also to get things out that may not be covered by the mainstream press. They (legislators) can put out their own unfiltered information.”

NCSL has been tracking legislators’ use of blogs and is set to begin a project to highlight the new ways legislators are using technology to communicate with constituents.

Legislators aren’t the only government officials using blogs. Some state agencies are utilizing the format to reach a new, more tech-savvy generation to get them involved in government. Several governors have blogs, usually written by staff members, to talk about what they’re doing.

Doug Robinson, executive director of the National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO), said some state agencies maintain blogs around domain topics, such as education and technology. He said some states use internal blogs to communicate with state employees in a less formal, and often quicker way.

“I think it can be a useful and valuable conduit for information exchange,” Robinson said. “I think blogs are going mainstream for a lot of people. I look at a blog almost every day for content related to technology.”

The Hawaii Legislative Reference Bureau Library, for instance, posts a blog called First Reading that reports on, and offers access to, resources related to state legislative issues as well as information about the state’s resources, studies and reports, and current legislation, according to Stephen Bibbs of First Reading. While it’s set

up to accept comments, Bibbs points out the site is designed as a nonpartisan research tool and addendum to the news.

“It is important we offer all services without expressed political opinion,” he said. “It is true we offer only those resources we feel to be authoritative and valuable, but not in regards to any particular political opinion or interpretation.”

Blogs are a growing communications tool, particularly for younger generations who have grown up with the Internet. The Pew Internet & American Life Project found that more than half—54 percent—of bloggers are under age 30.

While the most publicized blogs focus on politics and government, the Pew study found only 11 percent of bloggers overall focus on the topic. The most, 37 percent, focus on their lives or experiences.

“I see blogs as a part of the whole new, rich media environment,” Robinson said, citing the increased use of podcasts and RSS feeds in the private as well as government sectors.

Closing the Distance

Peña’s blog is personal. He talks about topics ranging from his views on redistricting in Texas to his visits in the district. He also talks about personal things, and, he says, that helps show people that he’s human. “If I’m watching a show about Superman and I want to make a cultural comment, I’ll comment about it,” he said.

“There was a distance between constituents and elected officials,” Peña said. “That distance is furthered by Web sites. With blogging, which is interactive—the feature that makes it distinct ... the interactive, instantaneous and linking nature—that allowed me to be a three-dimensional person.”

Peña began his blog in response to a political rival raising questions about his service to the district. Peña began posting to his blog, showing exactly what he’d been doing. That has helped, and Peña believes he won that and subsequent elections because of the rapport he’s built with constituents.

“I have to credit the dialogue or relationship that I built with my constituents,” he said. “Actually he (his political opponent) did me a great favor in helping me realize the gulf that lies between elected leaders and their constituents and how that gulf doesn’t have to be there.”

Blogs, Robinson said, are “more citizen-friendly and less formal. That’s why there’s an explosion in blogging. It gives people

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the ability to present their personal experiences, opinions, in a way not as structured as a press release, not as structured as a sound bite.”

That may have the effect of reaching people who may otherwise have no interest in seeking out information about their governments. Sen. John Valentine said The Senate Site—the blog of the majority party in Utah—has found that to be the case through comments from readers.

“Based on the comments we’re getting, it appears that we’ve got people that would not otherwise be engaged in government, who are now, for the first time, hooking in and recognizing that this is their government, not just their parents’ and grandparents,” Valentine said.

“I think the new technologies open up yet another way for people to be able to communicate with their government,” he said. “There’s no way that is going to be a cure-all, but it appears to me that having multiple ways of communication is very healthy to understanding how your government works.”

That’s one reason behind a blog through Arkansas Secretary of State Charlie Daniels’ office. Crystal Shell, communications coordinator for Daniels, said the secretary of state introduced a blog for youth—based on grade level—two years ago to give students a forum to talk about voting and youth issues.

Many students are interested in the blog, but haven’t addressed the specific topics sought for the government-sponsored site. The blog hasn’t taken off like the office hoped it would, but Shell said it’s obvious from the number of posts submitted for consideration that youth are interested in blogging.

“You try to come up with different ways to get youth involved in politics,” Shell said. “In the last few election cycles, there was such a decline in participation among younger voters. We tried to find ways to communicate ... to use their technology. Bring it to them in forms that we hope to participate in.”

While at this point the blog hasn’t been as successful as the secretary of state had hoped, Shell still thinks it can work. Daniels’ office is planning education forums for teachers, hoping to get students interested from that perspective.

“I’d love for it to be a big thing and have kids go at it,” she said. “It is the younger generation’s forum. It’s quick, fast. It seemed to be something that kids would latch onto, an instant gratification sort of thing, which we all know the younger generation likes.”

Valentine recognizes the blog will attract a particular audience, and said it’s good to make sure every segment of the population has a way to communicate. “I still get regular handwritten letters from constituents,” Valentine said. “I find I can predict

their age by the way they communicate.” He knows, for the most part, that the under-30 population will most likely communicate through e-mail or blogs, while the 30 to 60 set will communicate through e-mail, “snail mail” or telephone, and the over-60 set will communicate by handwritten letters.

Not everyone with a blog allows for the interactive communication. According to the Pew study, 87 percent of bloggers allow comments. Minnesota Rep. Ray Cox, who’s been blogging since December 2002, isn’t one of them, and he likes it that way. “I do get a lot of comments from people ... a lot of face to face comments,” he said.

Sharing Information

In addition to their interactive nature, blogs allow government officials to share unfiltered information, and address issues of concern in their states.

Bibbs, of the Hawaii Legislative Reference Bureau, said new technology “facilitates the implementation of traditional services and expands the platform of interchange.

“Blogs,” he said, “not only level the communication field between officials and the public, they contribute to the defining and prioritizing of issues.”

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger’s home page in California, for instance, in July added a daily blog from State Fire Marshal Ruben Grijalva about the wildfire season, including information about the fires to which crews have responded, heat advisories and other potential problems.

“That’s good information for the press and the public, and it serves as a magnet for people to our site,” said Jimmy Orr, director of e-communications for the California governor’s office.

The blogs on Schwarzenegger’s home page don’t allow for public comments yet, but Orr said that could come in the future. The revamped version of the Web site has only been online a few months. “You walk before you can run,” Orr said of changes down the line.

Right now, the governor’s office is focused on getting information out to the people of California. Cabinet heads and other members of the governor’s staff post information about Schwarzenegger’s actions of the day and other topics of interest in their areas of expertise. It’s written in a more informal style, and addresses the news of the day.

Ric Cantrell, assistant to majority leadership in the Utah Senate, said The Senate Site had three goals at inception.

“One was the perennial concern with how the media tells the story of the legislative process,” Cantrell said. “We have a cadre of talented, bright, sincere reporters. The issues range from agriculture to tax reform to social issues. There’s huge varieties of issues. We had a concern that sometimes we needed to tell people what was happening here without a filter.”

In addition, Cantrell said there are often issues in the legislature “that don’t rise to the level of a press release or a press conference.” Still, political and government junkies, he said, have an interest in those items. “It’d be nice to have somewhere to get those out to political junkies.”

Third, the blog helps put a face on legislators. “One of the problems a legislator faces is that people see them as a dehumanized moonlit mass they don’t like,” Cantrell said. “These are real

people. They're individuals. I wanted people to see my senators as individuals and less as a two-dimensional caricature of a person.

"The people own the government. I wanted to make sure they know their government."

Orr couldn't agree more. "Most people will never make it to the Capitol. Most people will never meet the leader of their state," he said. "The closest they're going to come to interacting with the leader is the Web site so it's really important that you treat the Web site as a valuable, if not the most valuable, part of your communications shop."

Cantrell said "nobody knows where this is going to end up. It's going to be interesting to ride this thing and see where it takes us."

One thing is certain, however, according to Cantrell: Blogs have created a more informal dialogue between government and constituents.



"Blogging is not about going to the podium, grabbing a mike and making an announcement," he said. "Blogging is mingling with friends and acquaintances, and even potential enemies, at a cocktail party and having conversations. It's about establishing a relationship."

—Mary Branham Dusenberry is the managing editor of *State News* magazine.

Starting a Blog: Find your voice, and stick to it

So you want to start a blog.

Some people in state governments across the country say it's a quick and easy way to get your message to your constituents. Blogs, they say, also facilitate conversation about government with a new generation.

But experienced bloggers say those interested in starting one should keep some things in mind:

Blogs should be updated regularly.

"If people go to your site and it looks like a library or archive site, they'll never come back," said Jimmy Orr, director of e-communications for California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. "If you're able to put up new content, there's a reason for them to come back."

The Web, Orr said, doesn't operate on a conventional five-day workweek. "It's important that other elements of our society—if they want a successful Web site—they have to treat it that way," he said. "If you want communications with your people, whether in politics or business, that's important."

Blogs are not a substitute for personal interaction.

Those who read blogs are "not the full range of your constituency," said Texas Rep. Aaron Peña. "It's a segment of your constituency. I've found myself at points getting lost in the intellectual dialogue with people who are probably from Austin or Houston or Dallas or L.A. And I cannot forget I represent a whole different group of people."

Blogs don't take the place of the media.

Ric Cantrell, assistant to the majority leadership in the Utah Senate, said The Senate Site in Utah adds perspective and depth to the issues. "We don't have any interest in supplanting the media," he said. "We have a strong interest in holding them accountable."

Cantrell said if he knows a reporter is working on a story, he'll hold off writing about that topic in a blog. "I didn't want the attitude that we're trying to scoop the media," he said. "You need a healthy media and a healthy blog community. People can get a perspective of what's going on in a healthy blogging community."

Blogs can show how people, politicians in particular, evolve on an issue.

Peña said he's tried to get some of his Texas colleagues involved in a legislative blog much like the ones in Utah and Minnesota. "They're still holding to the idea you can only hold one position," he said, "that you can't evolve."

He's found the blog shows him how his position on different issues has changed. "It helps me to flesh out the various thoughts floating through my mind on an issue," Peña said. "I'll have an initial reaction and then with time and listening to arguments, I'll have a secondary reaction. I'll even have a later reaction."

"As I write (the blog), I will see the evolution of my position and it helps me to see why I did it," he said. "I can see how I've changed as a representative and as a person."

Minnesota Rep. Ray Cox said that may prohibit some elected officials from blogging. "I think the hesitancy is that it gives your opponent a little more ammunition if they want to mine (the blog)," he said.

Find your voice and respect your audience.

"Don't phony up," Peña said. "Your audience can tell when you're being phony."

Cox said blogs can show your audience a personal side. "Let them know you have a family, you have kids," he said. "You can incorporate all those threads in there and put a real normal human voice to a politician, rather than a sound bite the 10 o'clock news captures."

Blogs need to be interesting.

"We saw a lot of blog sites that were pretty bland and not very fun to play on," said Sen. John Valentine of Utah. "We wanted a site that was fun to come to."

Blogs don't have to be difficult to create or maintain.

"You have existing resources," Orr said. "You have a cabinet, you have staff. So the value is to take advantage of those resources and to say to your cabinet officials, 'I want you to blog for me on this.'"