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News vs. Noise:
Issue and Stakeholder Management in the Blogosphere and Beyond
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**Networks of Ideas:
Navigating and Organizing
Issues Online**





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1 Overview

The blogosphere is a virtually undiscovered territory in the Canadian government, and yet is an important communication tool within the public domain. But because this space is so public and continuously increasing in size, it has become very intimidating for public servants. Public Works and Government Services Canada's Online Technologies Centre of Expertise is committed to identifying, sharing and expanding the innovative ways citizens and governments engage in ongoing interactions. As such, it is dedicated to creating awareness of such issues through conferences and events.

The September 13, 2005, conference "News vs. Noise: Issue and Stakeholder Management in the Blogosphere and Beyond" was hosted by the Centre of Expertise in the Innovatec room at Place du Portage. This event showcased an interesting array of speakers from both private and public institutions. Abstracts for each presentation are provided in the Appendix to this report. The presentations provided encouraging insight into the growing blogosphere, and tools and techniques in tracking and organizing information and issues online. In addition, these presenters offered illuminating details and case studies on stakeholder management in the Network Age.

We've gathered interesting information from this event and captured it in *Networks of Ideas: Navigating and Organizing Issues Online*. This document examines the networked world of the blogosphere and the role it plays in collective memory. Included are details on the role of bloggers as journalists and their real world effects, such as in the Gomery case. We also explore heartening examples of how online tactics have served to strengthen government ties to clients and the development of policy.

While this report seeks to encourage future forays into the blogosphere and beyond, it also leaves some unanswered questions that could be explored in future events hosted by the Centre of Expertise.



2 Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the Internet has evolved into a powerful medium for public discourse. It quickly became a space that facilitated communication on a global scale. The Internet would also serve as a storage locker of information accessible to everyone with access. As such, stakeholders began to build websites, and long lists of contacts became accessible online. Then, in 1991, search engines arrived and Google would soon command the line in issue searches. High-speed Internet became less expensive and widely accessible to the public. The impact would be seen on the online landscape as the public began depositing great creative effort onto this space. Networks of individuals and organizations evolved from there.

One of the most interesting developments that has occurred as a part of this online revolution of issues and networks is the emergence of the blogosphere. This new environment consists of a community of blogs, online journals expressing the opinions and views of their author. Blogs have become an easy way for various types of users to produce news stories, both amateur and professional in nature, and discuss issues in a public forum.

As a result of the meeting of both public and private interests in this medium, the lives of information and issue managers have become much more interesting. The Internet has become a new world of wonders to explore and exploit. This requires a new set of skills and tools that differ from those traditionally needed for media. It also increases expectations on government as it opens up new ways to interact with citizens. However, issue managers often find themselves in the dark when it comes to this new world. The government, while it has made great strides in the last few years, has traditionally been slow to react and adapt to the online environment. In order to take full advantage of the networks and increased access to public opinion, issue managers need to be empowered when it comes to using the Web to the government's advantage.

On September 13, 2005, the Centre of Expertise hosted the conference "Noise Vs. News: Issue and Stakeholder Management in the Blogosphere and Beyond." This conference explored a new communication environment created by the blogosphere, provided an overview of techniques to harness the new information, and outlined the new skills needed in issue management. It also examined the issue framing process and reviewed some basic information management processes of the Web to ensure that specific information makes its way to relevant stakeholders.



3 Barabasi and Beyond: Scale-free Networks

Barabasi examines the structure and formation of networks. His theory is based on the discoveries uncovered by researchers' efforts at mapping the Internet. These revelations contradicted the assumptions of past network theories, which suggested that complex networks were random and that existing nodes had an average number of links. However, the study found that the Internet consisted of a few highly connected sites.

As a result of these findings, Barabasi was led to propose the Power Law: "any node is roughly four times as likely to have just half the number of incoming links as another node."¹ The Power Law helps to explain such systems that are dominated by sites like Google and Yahoo!. Scale-free networks take into account the existence of hubs. The constantly growing nature of complex networks allows nodes to acquire new links as time goes by. Because of what Barabasi calls "preferential attachment," the more connected nodes are biasly favoured over others. Because these nodes gain more favour, more nodes are likely to connect to them and these nodes will potentially become hubs. Calculations show that a new node is two times as likely to link to an existing node that has two times as many connections as its neighbours.

These hubs could be thought of as opinion leaders within social networks and could be used to describe the system of blogs. Those that are linked to the most or have the most contacts will be eventually considered opinion leaders or hubs. Much of the avenues of research on networks also describe networks' vulnerability to attacks of the system, which are often applied to computer viruses, business failures, marketing and cultural phenomena, such as fads.

In addition, Duncan J. Watts adds to this discussion of networks with something he calls information cascades.² These involve "flows of information emerging from multiple overlapping sources; the world of many-to-many."³ It occurs when people make decisions based on the decisions of others. Networks could be described in terms of connectivity by which influence is transmitted between individuals. Decision makers turn to others for advice when they must make decisions on subjects they have limited knowledge of. Therefore, decisions are often based on a network of ideas.

As such, this serves as a model to describe the structure of networks interacting within and between organizations. It also helps explain the existence of hubs or opinion leaders operating within them.

¹ Barabasi, Albert-Laszlo. 2003. Scale-Free Networks. American Scientific. May 2003: 52

² D. J. Watts. A simple model of global cascades on random networks. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. USA, 99:5766-5771, 2002.

³ Richard, Elisabeth. "Semantics." See Appendix A.



4 The Blogosphere

Weblogs, or blogs as they are more commonly known, are online journals that reflect “the point of view of one individual on the world as he or she defines it on a given day.”⁴ An increasingly popular tool, blogs have painted the World Wide Web with the observations and opinions of the populace and are playing an important role online. Bloggers are becoming journalists relating news stories and views of the world through the Web. They are the opposite of mass media, as anyone can actively participate in the creation and deconstruction of news. And, thanks to such sites as LiveJournal and Blogger, blogs have also become simple, easy, and highly accessible tools for all to use. In fact, it is estimated that one blog is created every second.⁵ In addition, they have also been listed among the top five major innovations in the history of the Internet alongside e-mail, HTML, Google and high-speed access, emphasizing just how important blogs have become.

It is also important to note that these online journals do not exist as separate and closed entities. Blogs often operate in a network or community linking to not only mainstream news sources, but also to each other, creating a public space for conversations. In this way, blogs reflect Barabasi’s scale-free networks, as some blogs become hubs, online opinion leaders, whom other nodes connect and link to. As such, this thriving ecosystem has been dubbed the Blogosphere.

The Blogosphere has been a pervasive element in the online world and an important forum for public discourse. It can be telling of what is being said about us online. Thus, it has been argued that this system should be considered in the management of issues and stakeholders alike. Mangers in the government are becoming increasingly aware of the impact of blogs and how they can contribute to public opinion and policy issues as they continue to take a leadership position online.

4.1 Why Do Blogs Matter?

There are more than 15 million blogs on the Internet sporting about 1.4 billion links.⁶ They have a wide range of audiences with 27% of all Internet users regularly reading blogs (up from 17% from last year) with the top bloggers averaging close to 300,000 visits per day.⁷ These “A” list blogs, such as Boing Boing and InstaPundit, are increasingly competing with mainstream media as they rank alongside them with the most site visits of all online news sources.

Professional journalists also read blogs. Statistics show that 58% of journalists read blogs regularly; 33% to uncover breaking news or scandals. 63% of journalists believe that blogs will become a more popular tool for organizations seeking to inform clients and customers.⁸ We have seen blogs play a significant role in major news events and serve as important sources of information because bloggers are able to give first hand accounts online. Recent disaster Hurricane Katrina is a perfect example of how blogs can play a major role in reporting as citizens are able to blog about the experience amidst such events.

4.1.1 The Gomery Case

Most importantly, blogs matter because they have real-world effects. Many blogs have been integral in breaking news stories that have subsequently been covered in mainstream media. An example of this is the Gomery case, where blogs had a profound effect on official proceedings. During the Sponsorship Scandal, Judge Gomery placed a ban on the publication of testimonies. However, an American blogger

⁴ Richard, 1.

⁵ Richard, 1.

⁶ Ketcheson, Ian. “Blogs and the public environment.” See Appendix A.

⁷ Ketcheson, 2.

⁸ Ketcheson, 3-4.



named Captain Ed, violated this ban when he posted a well-detailed summary of a testimony on his blog. While his site received a fair amount of traffic, the number of hits increased exponentially after a popular blog, InstaPundit, picked up on the story and linked to Captain Ed. Eventually, the Canadian mainstream media discovered the story brewing online and they too began to report on the contents of Captain Ed's blog. The site began getting 400,000 hits a day.⁹ The affair soon became an issue management crisis provoked over the actions of one blogger.

These kinds of cases demonstrate that blogs have an impact and can affect how issues and news spread. Being aware of what is happening in the blogosphere can provide insight into the public's concerns and how they view issues. With that information in mind, equipping issue managers with the right tools to track blogs may be the key to their success.

4.2 Tricks to Tracking in the Blogosphere

If a blog is created every second, how does one keep track of them all and how does one effectively manage issues? Many tools exist to help track issues across the landscape of the blogosphere. Here are a few:

1. **RSS** – Real Simple Syndication is a simple form of XML used to represent news sites' rapidly changing content. Also, RSS can be used to keep track of new material online and can be read by using an aggregator.
2. **Aggregators** – They are often Web sites, such as Bloglines, that allow you to sign up for RSS feeds. The feeds are often categorized according to topic. The information is organized according to a letter format, displaying the title, author, and a brief summary for easy consumption.
3. **Technorati and Feedster** - These are Web sites that read the RSS feeds and organize the results. They can then analyze the information through links and content, and display the results according to the most popular blog or the most popular issue. This can provide issue managers with information on what the public is viewing and discussing online.

By using the above tools, issue managers will have a better understanding of what is going on in the blogosphere which, in turn, will help them keep a finger on the public pulse. These tools also enable navigation of its expansive domain.

4.3 Are Bloggers Journalists?

What do you do if a blogger calls you? This question is on the minds of many public servants. As bloggers gradually take on the roles of news reporters and impact journalists, some government employees are concerned with what to do when that call occurs. Do you treat them the same as any mass media affiliated journalist? According to Lauren Gelman of Stanford Law School Center for Internet Society, bloggers can lawfully be considered journalists. Being a journalist has nothing to do with being associated with a company. Journalism is about the material that is produced, the news, and the intent behind it.

Journalists are protected under the law. They are given this privilege because they serve as a vital source of information for the public. However, this role can be weakened if the journalist's ability to gather news is impaired in some way.¹⁰ Bloggers and mainstream journalists perform very similar functions. We can then argue that they should have the same rights.

⁹ Ketcheson, 8.

¹⁰ Gelmen, Lauren. "Bloggers and Journalists." See Appendix A.



That said, should public servants treat bloggers accordingly? While this could not be answered at the conference, the issue clearly needs further exploration.



5 Managing Issues on the Web

A Web epistemologist, as defined by Richard Rogers of Govcom.org, is a person who engages in knowledge and research that is only possible through the Internet. These philosophers are concerned with connecting sources of information and deriving meaning from them. Issue and content managers in the government often find themselves falling into this category while exploring the Web. While sometimes a difficult task to undertake, these web epistemologists have found a number of techniques and tools to spread, manage, and organize these issues to create knowledge from the chaos of the online world.

5.1 Reaching Out to Online Audiences

Blogs are quickly taking up space across the World Wide Web. Because the tools are easy to use and accessible, both public and private spheres are tapping into their power as communication tools to engage in conversations with one another. As a result, blogs are reviving the Web. They give users a new reason to log on, engage and create on the Web. Therefore, it only makes sense to use these tools and be aware of the most effective ways they can reach out to the blogosphere. The following are some important items to consider when managing issues with this type of online audience.

5.1.1 Spreading Issues

When managing issues on the Web, it is key to understand just how the Internet, specifically blogs, can be used to spread your ideas quickly and effectively. The Internet has the astounding ability to spread ideas with amazing speed. **Memes**, a term referring to the transmission of cultural ideas, have found a safe haven on the Web; anything from chain letters to “dancing babies” are spreading from user to user. The speed of this can also be seen in the **Slashdot Effect**. The Slashdot Effect refers to “the magnetic effect that can pull information-hungry netizens towards one source.”¹¹ This can have negative effects: when too many users visit a specific site at the same time, it can become too much for the server and, as a result, the Web site may crash.

But how do you “cash in” on these phenomena? How do you use the Web to spread your ideas and attract visitors? The following four elements should be considered:¹²

- **Plan** first how your information will be structured. Create a purpose; know what your content will be, and your support (the source of your inspiration).
- **Design** your site accordingly. Choose the right fonts and colours; ensure your content is pleasing to read and easy to navigate. This will help maximize your reach on the Internet.
- **Implement** the right tool. Which ones will you use? A Web site, a blog, or chat room will help decide what netizens you’ll attract. Consider the audience and their level of literacy to effectively implement your ideas on the net.
- **Market** your information. If you want your content to spread, you once again employ RSS tactics; place your content in **RSS** format. A few governmental bodies are leaning in this direction; the Government of Canada Newsroom offers RSS feeds of news stories. However, to access this material, the user must already know about your site. To increase awareness, the next move would be to register with an **aggregator**, such as Bloglines. The aggregator will suggest your site to users based on their interests and needs increasing the chances of your material being accessed.

¹¹ Richard, 1.

¹² Downes, Stephen. “Reaching the Blogosphere.” See Appendix A.



5.1.2 Blogging At Work

The Web is in an interactive space and, as such, users expect interaction when they venture online. The Blogosphere is certainly no exception to this and, by nature, is an environment in which people demand to be engaged and interact. So be prepared. An interesting phenomenon that is exploding is blogging at work. While many cases of bloggers being fired because of what they have written about their jobs have sprung up in the media, many encouraging stories have been submerged as well. For instance, Sun Microsystems encourages their employees to keep blogs both internally and externally because they believe blogging creates an atmosphere of sharing and innovation.

We also have to look internally. What guidelines are there for government employees who blog? And how can the government use the idea of blogging internally as in the above example? And what would happen if a MP had a blog? Blogging could become an avenue for reaching audiences at amazing speeds. Essentially, it could be a medium for press releases.

In a Government of Canada context, the Internet has witnessed cases of blogging in Parliament, including BloggingTories.ca and [former] Prime Minister Martin's blog. If anything can be learned from these experiences it is the importance of authenticity. In order for blogs to truly make an impact, they need to really get ideas out. The prose should be polished, translated, and have a clear sense of authenticity. The public is sophisticated when it comes to writing on the Web and expects genuine and reliable voices. That is what the public will respond to most and will thus increase the effectiveness of spreading ideas.

5.2 Categorization

Categorization is a useful concept to apply when considering issue management both in terms of the blogosphere and the Internet in general. Categorization involves the organization of information on the Web in an unobtrusive way. It attempts to create or impose order or structure through classification based on keywords, content and other factors. There are various methods of this process found on the Web. Here are just a few concepts and tools to consider.

5.2.1 Tagging

A tag is an element that contains content that renders a substance identifiable by means of search tools. It can be a subject or a category. In this way, a tag is used so that "People can categorize their posts, photos, and links with any tag that makes sense."¹³ Tagging involves improving information with additional semantic mark up. By applying free form key words to the information, tagging serves as a mechanism for sorting words and phrases. In order to find information on the Web, you need to create a taxonomy of terms that you would choose to best represent your information. Tagging removes the centralized decision-making on semantic organizing and distributes it to everyday users. Being aware of how people tag information cannot only make searches on the Web easier but help you spread your word.

5.2.2 Social Bookmarking

Similar to tagging, social bookmarking is a tool to store information according to keywords, and is becoming a new trend on the Web. With such sites as *del.icio.us.com*, users are able to store articles and URL's online in their own specialized space and organize them according to keywords or phrases. They act as file cabinets and, because of the nature of the online world, allow the user to file the item within

¹³ Technorati. <http://www.technorati.com/help/tags.html>. 2005/11/11.



several file folders. Thus, the user is able to file items under all applicable ideas. When an article is needed, the user merely has to look up terms that apply to it to find other related articles quickly and easily.

In addition, these sites generally allow users to explore each other's saved items. This adds to the collective knowledge as one can peruse how other's tag items. This can also result in the discovery of new information of interest. Thus, this social bookmarking adds to the management of issues on the Web through the collective categorization of information.

5.2.3 Filtering

It is safe to say that there is a vast quantity of information on the Web and it is impossible to keep track of it all. Filtering then becomes a useful technique to deal with this information overload. To facilitate this process, there are different tools and methods such as Technorati and Feedster that can act as filters, examining the content of blogs. These sites read RSS feeds and organize the results accordingly. Google news and pictures act in a similar manner and display the most important or popular results through a keyword search.

But as the information chaos becomes more organized through these tools, it is also creating new roles. The **Newsmaster**, for instance, is a person that uses these tools to scan and cover large bodies of information and organizes and customizes it to specific audience needs.¹⁴ Thus, the Newsmaster acts as a filter by capturing the results from RSS feeds, aggregators, and Web sites, such as Technorati and Feedster, and organizes them according to categories to appeal to various audiences.

5.2.4 Folksonomy: The Web as an Open System

The normal state of affairs on the Internet is pure chaos as opinions, ideas, and information circulate freely online. But this chaotic nature is good for many reasons. It provides an open forum for discussion and allows a wide variety of voices to come through. To actively organize the Internet is to close off various possibilities and close off networks. And, when it comes to the categorization of the Internet, keeping networks open is something important to be considered. Organization runs the risk of blocking off voices that should be heard. These tagging and filtering tools, however, help to ensure that networks stay open as they create layers upon layers of filtering. Also, there is not only one person using these tools but there are several users tagging and filtering information. Each of these users specializes in different areas and topics. It puts the control in the hands of the bloggers and other self-publishers as they share, tag, and create links between each other.

This creates knowledge from the chaotic array of information. It also permits the Web to be self-organizing allowing for multiple points of view. The activities of tagging and filtering by bloggers and self-publishers add to the creation of taxonomy or, in this case, a "folksonomy". This breaks the monolithic taxonomy and replaces it with something that is dynamic in the view of tagging and filtering. The result is a more open Web along with more open networks in which diverse points of view can operate. Issue and content managers in the government should be aware and encourage these networks and even contribute to their development.

5.3 Issue Crawler

¹⁴ Downes, 1.



The above are useful techniques and tools for issue and content managers to navigate through the blogosphere and beyond and gain insight into global conversations. But Govcom.org takes this process one step further with a software called *Issue Crawler*. It can identify the geography of an issue, or rather, where that issue is based in comparison to where it is actually occurring. An issue may arise in any part of the world, but it can be framed and influenced by stakeholders across the globe by way of the expansive online world.

5.3.1 The Myanmar Project

Issue Crawler was born in the context of the Myanmar Project. Myanmar, a southeast Asia country formerly known as Burma, was actively involved in e-commerce business. With a “disrespectful” e-crawler, they studied the e-commerce activity on the Myanmar site by crawling through links. By examining linkages between Myanmar and such sites as the World Bank, they got a sense of the links leaving the e-commerce site to various companies. This research enabled them to study what kind of business was being done with the West since pressure had been placed on the Myanmar government to encourage Western companies to invest.

5.3.2 Censorship

The crawler was then used to examine online censorship in China. In order to visualize this censorship, researchers in Toronto and Stanford used proxy sensors. Using 750 sites and a set of categories (politics, religion, semantics, etc.) they tried to determine what censorship policies were operating. By finding a network of sites, such as woman’s rights, they were able to create a picture of censorship by examining which of these sites were blocked. This helped to create a map that represented what was being censored.

5.3.3 How Does Issue Crawler Work?

Issue Crawler studies where the issues are based, where they are happening, and then whether the base recognizes where the issues are happening. By studying links online, it creates a map that represents the network of an issue. Basically, it locates and visualizes networks on the Web. In examining one specific issue, you begin by finding starting points of this issue and then paste associated Internet links into something called the “harvester.” These links can include search engine results, news sites, Web page link lists, etc. However, to acquire trustworthy sources, it is best to research who the top groups involved in the issue are, then insert the links to their sites and link pages into the harvester. It then “fetches the pages of the starting point, it looks for the outlinks from the starting point, and it finds out what outlinks the starting points have in common.”¹⁵ *Issue Crawler* then identifies common links (co-links) by conducting co-link analysis.

The result is an issue network that provides the notion of where the issue is based. By looking at the “actors,” i.e. the list of sites, you can see how they interlink. *Issue Crawler* can then construct a visual map of the network according to where the issues are based and then perform an online search or review news stories to find out where the issue is happening. By pasting in actors of the issue and keywords from the news stories, *Issue Crawler* will display a new map showing where the issue is based in comparison to where the issue is happening. Thus, *Issue Crawler* provides an understanding of the geography of an issue and who is concerned with it. This can create very useful knowledge when managing issues online.

¹⁵ Govcom.org. “The Places of Issues: Issue Crawler Back-end Movie.”
<http://files.issuecrawler.net/issuecrawler.movie/streaming.htm>.



For more information on *Issue Crawler*, please consult:
<http://files.issuecrawler.net/issuecrawler.movie/streaming.htm>

5.4 Short-term Memory

In managing issues, there are many tools, like *Issue Crawler*, that can help create meaning around information. These tools provide a way of gathering, spreading, and organizing issues online. However, problems can present themselves when using such tools. For instance, while the Internet may be able to store an incredible amount of information for an extensive period of time, reviewing RSS feeds will show on current issues, omitting dated information. The opposite can also be true, as issue managers and stakeholder analysts often find themselves pulling up information on stakeholders from over a decade. Different tools and techniques are therefore needed in order to manage stakeholders effectively. As described in the “Stakeholder Management” section of this document, OCAPI and ACOA are excellent examples of how a long-term memory can be managed online in stakeholder management.



6 A Day in the Life of a Stakeholder Analyst

The stakeholder analyst is often cast in a large role when it comes to the stakeholder management stage. Essentially, a stakeholder analyst is charged with the “task of maintaining a repository of stakeholder opinion, that would otherwise reside in the back archive of news releases and unswept corners of the Internet...”¹⁶ As such, they help gather public opinion for the uses of policy development, building upon the foundations of democracy. This can entail a variety of activities, including writing briefs, pouring over news releases, reviewing proceedings in legislatures of territorial governments and regional communities, and media analysis. This can all result in building an archive of “who said what and when”. In this, stakeholder analysts are involved in a paradoxical relationship as they offer answers but are also disengaged from the material.¹⁷ They can also become embroiled in information wars during major world events in which they must provide weekly updates of concerns and statistics.

Stakeholder analysts started out with newspapers, departmental libraries, combing through print versions of Hansard and the high piles of letters and submissions to the Minister. While these continue to play a role, the Internet (and Intranet) has placed more emphasis on the part of these key players of the online world. And while the Internet has a wealth of material to offer, it presents new and different kinds of challenges for these public servants.

6.1 Stakeholder Management

While the Internet (and Intranet) provides ample opportunity for issue and stakeholder management, it is not always easy to take advantage of this, especially for those working in government. It is important to note that there are exemplarily models for building stakeholder management and analysis online. OCAPI and ACOA are two government-based organizations that found a way to make it work for them.

6.1.1 OCAPI

Down in the depth of the Health Products and Food Branch (HPFB) of Health Canada, there is a group learning and implementing ways to involve both “high tech and high touch” into the artistry of stakeholder management. The Office of Consumer and Public Involvement (OCAPI) provides “information and opportunities to the people of Canada, particularly consumers of the products HPFB regulates, to become meaningfully involved in the decision-making processes around HPFB priorities, policies and programs”.¹⁸ Faced with budget, resource, and time constraints in the management of stakeholders and gathering public opinion, OCAPI developed a system of differing technology or “touch.”

Budget constraints meant creative ways to engage stakeholders. OCAPI used a variety of methods involving high touch (face-to-face meetings, one-on-one conversations), and technology (teleconferences, e-mail exchanges, and more interestingly, online workspaces). Online collaborative spaces offered a geographically dispersed group the opportunity to be engaged and brought a number of different voices to the table. OCAPI was able to provide documents online and ask for comments that could be shared with other stakeholders to create a conversation around issues in order to effect policy, which made the process more accountable. From there, OCAPI could ask them questions on accessibility, if there were gaps in the information, and how the information could be delivered to the stakeholder’s constituency.

¹⁶ Stonyk, Margaret. “The Evolving Art of Stakeholder Management.” See Appendix A.

¹⁷ Stonyk, 2.

¹⁸ Lepine, Erin. “High Tech and High Touch.” See Appendix A.



This collaborative approach reduced administrative burden and increased transparency between stakeholders and the small group of staff. While it also offered limitations, such as difficulties sustaining levels of participation, it also allowed stakeholders to go beyond conversations with project managers to conversations with each other. It helped bring people back to the table and create conversations around important issues that resulted in the development of policy.

6.1.2 ACOA: Clients in the Media

The Business Development Program of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) in Nova Scotia has also found an interesting method of stakeholder management in the online environment.

ACOA developed a grassroots marketing and awareness campaign through its Intranet site. With 5,400 commercial projects since 1995, few staff members retained in-depth knowledge of their large number of clients.¹⁹ Thus, ACOA developed an online method to increase staff-client awareness, which made use of client news stories found in the mainstream media.

Highlighting stories of clients in the media was an idea generated to inform staff of individual client achievements and to identify ACOA's relationship with the client. To do this, they would obtain media stories on their clients and review their background with ACOA information systems. Adding information from account managers and interviews, an original news article and URL would be posted on the Intranet site and staff would be advised of its release with an email.

The project does have its challenges. It is difficult to find a variety of media sources, establish timeline standards, and compete with external and internal channels. While a seemingly innocent endeavour, the benefits of the project are largely positive. The ACOA's hit counters have shown that, on average, nearly 78% of its staff visit the site within 3 days of a new posting.²⁰ As staff receive the knowledge via media stories, they are able to draw on them in social and business settings, are more aware of client achievements and the value of the program in which they are involved in.

¹⁹ Smith, Alex. "Grassroots Marketing." See Appendix A.

²⁰ Smith, 8.



7 Diving Into Stakeholder Management: Lessons Learned

- **In assessing the needs of your stakeholders** a number of items should be considered. In identifying the issues needing to be discussed, ensure that you *allow your stakeholders to frame the issue*. In any discussion, it can be beneficial for the stakeholders to define what the issues are and how they will be discussed. You also have to *identify the preferred medium* to operate in; face-to-face is ideal, however, moving online when this is not possible can provide an adequate forum for discussion.
- **Enable capacity.** Bring the stakeholders together and provide the space, but do not stop there, ensure that they are provided with the proper information and training to adequately engage in discussion and address the issues so that accessibility is not an issue.
- **Recognize the constraints** of online interaction. Levels of participation are not always sustainable. The conversation can diminish in any medium. In a teleconference or an online space with asynchronous discussions, it is much harder to stimulate than in face-to-face conversations. It becomes important to recognize the signs and develop methods to deal with the situation.
- **Listen to feedback** from stakeholders. They will let you know if it is working for them. If it is not, then you may want to consider alternative actions.
- **The devil is in the details** as they say. When producing documents and archiving “who said what and when,” the minute details can become important in analyzing stakeholders and issues. The information has to be reliable, well sourced, and easy to access. In the end, it becomes a matter of semantics when providing context for stakeholder issues.
- **The Government needs to become authoritative online.** The public uses search engines to research issues and, unfortunately, all too often, the Government does not come up in the results. The Government needs to master how to push and pull the good information and become the source of influence. In addition, it should not be afraid to post links that lead stakeholders outside of the Government online space and be comfortable with its authority.
- **Geeky is hip.** Stakeholder analysis and stakeholder management was once considered a realm for the “quirky and eccentric.” The Internet and other innovative technologies have helped these tasks become trendy. This renders those who can master its domain hip.



8 Conclusion

There is an old Chinese curse that goes: “May you live in interesting times.” The Internet, and more specifically the blogosphere, has certainly made life interesting for issue and content managers, as well as stakeholder analysts. But thanks to the set of tools available, this curse is not as threatening as it may seem. As the blogosphere grows and flourishes on the Web, it becomes a phenomenon that should not be ignored. It provides a space for the public to engage in conversations creating a network or community in which they not only critique the media but also create their own version of the news.

Blogs have real world effects, and there are many tools available to easily track, organize and spread issues in this environment. As such, issues managers should be aware of this activity and be empowered to engage in this online world. For a number of years, stakeholder analysts have been using the Web, as well as other methods, to track stakeholders and create meaning around the information found. Learning how the Internet can be used to take advantage of the issues and stakeholder management is an important step for the Government in engaging with the public.

The September 13, 2005, conference “News vs. Noise: Issue and Stakeholder Management in the Blogosphere and Beyond” clarified some processes to engage in this activity. It also highlighted that there are some conceptual muddles to continue to work through. So, when a public servant finally does get that first call from a blogger, maybe he or she will have a clearer understanding of how to handle the call.



Appendix I: Abstracts

Title:	Semantics
Presenter:	Elisabeth Richard
Organization:	Centre of Expertise
Abstract:	As an introduction to the September 2005 conference, this presentation provides explanations towards basic concepts of issue management in the online environment. It examines the definition of blogs, the slashdot effect, information cascades, scale-free networks and the power law. It also provides visuals to enhance concepts of online networks and discusses these in terms of conversations on the web.
Resources:	PowerPoint presentation/Bilingual

Title:	Blogs and the Public Environment
Presenter:	Ian Ketcheson
Organization:	Social Development Canada
Abstract:	The blogosphere has increasingly gained importance as a public space. As statistics demonstrate that blogs are maintaining a steadily increasing readership among Internet users, it is suggested that these simple tools are becoming competition for mainstream media as bloggers take on the role of journalists. As conversations online, blogs spread ideas at a phenomenal rate and are thus a powerful tool in the hands of the populace. This presentation examines these issues and poses questions of how will the Government respond to this new domain and how will it learn to use blogs to its advantage.
Resources:	PowerPoint presentation

Title:	The Places of Issues: <i>Issue Crawler</i> Back-end Movie
Presenter:	Richard Rogers
Organization:	Govcom.org
Abstract:	<i>Issue Crawler</i> is network location software. Through co-link analysis it is able to visually represent the geography of an issue online. It can be used to examine where the issue is based and where the issue is happening and if the base recognizes where the issue is happening. By exploring the Narmada Dams issue, this movie clip explains how this software can be used to investigate the networks of issues online.
Resources:	The movie clip is available at: http://files.issuecrawler.net/issuecrawler.movie/streaming.htm

Title:	Reaching the Blogosphere
Presenter:	Stephen Downes
Organization:	National Research Council
Abstract:	The blogosphere is a chaotic space of voices and information. However, there are a number of ways to impact and navigate this landscape. This presentation discusses the tools and roles that are emerging online to do just that. By examining RSS feeds,



	aggregation, tagging, and filtering, Downes explores how information on the Web becomes self-organizing within an open network. In utilizing these tools and concepts, one may effectively reach the blogosphere.
Resources:	PowerPoint presentation/English

Title:	Bloggers and Journalists
Presenter:	Lauren Gelman
Organization:	Stanford University
Abstract:	By examining how the term “journalist” can be defined, Gelman uses examples from the law to help conceptualize the role a blogger plays in reporting the news. The American First Amendment promotes the right of the press and Gelman argues that this right should be extended to journalists in the blogosphere. Further, this presentation explores the impact that weblogs have had on journalism and the media in general and their value within democracy.
Resources:	PowerPoint presentation/English

Title:	The Evolving Art of Stakeholder Management
Presenter:	Margaret Stonyk
Organization:	Social Development Canada
Abstract:	The world of stakeholder analysis has become increasingly complex with the advent of the Internet and search engines. With the wealth of material it offers, locating and organizing it has become a challenge for those charged with the task. Margaret Stonyk provides a detailed and personal account of her years in the public service as a stakeholder analyst. This presentation identifies key elements, from information wars to rolling documents, in successful management of stakeholders and policy development.
Resources:	Word Document/English

Title:	High Tech and High Touch: The Evolving Art of Stakeholder Management
Presenter:	Erin Lepine
Organization:	Health Canada
Abstract:	The Office of Consumer and Public Involvement (OCAPI) of the Food Branch of Health Canada offers a range of communication with their stakeholders of both “touch and tech.” By examining methods implemented in two case studies, this presentation acknowledges the variety of ways to interact with these stakeholders. It also looks at how online collaborative workspaces can enable a geographically dispersed group an opportunity to engage in conversations. Further, it illustrates constraints and challenges, and benefits and other considerations such as the blending of tech and touch in stakeholder management.
Resources:	PowerPoint presentation/English.

Title:	Grassroots Marketing: Clients in the Media
Presenter:	Alex Smith
Organization:	Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA)
Abstract:	Since 1995, the Business Development Program of ACOA Nova Scotia has handled



Abstract:	5,400 projects agency-wide and 126 employees. As a result, very few employees possessed in-depth knowledge of their clients. This presentation outlines ACOA's marketing approach to increase client awareness within the agency. Further, it explains how the group was able to use their intranet site to post articles created from media attention on their clients to empower their employees as organizational ambassadors and to strengthen staff-client relations.
Resources:	PowerPoint presentation/English

Title:	Welcome to My Desktop
Presenter:	Lyndsay Buehler
Organization:	Centre of Expertise
Abstract:	The blogosphere can be an intimidating place, but thanks to the proliferation of handy online tools, it has become easier to dive into its wealth of information. This presentation provides a clear overview and pictorial guide to navigating this space with the most popular tools available. For those drowning in a sea of information, it illustrates how to determine what the issues are by examining Technorati and Pubsub, how to keep track of them through Bloglines, and how to organize what you find with social bookmarking tools such as del.iciou.s.com.
Resources:	PowerPoint presentation and PDF file.