Consider the Digital Influence in Making Policy

By Mary Branham

Friday, May 25, 2012 at 12:00 AM

The world of technology is change so quickly that it’s often difficult to keep up.

For that reason, Amy Webb, CEO of Webbmedia Group, said it’s particularly important for legislators to understand all the new activities the digital world creates.

“This is particularly important to me that you understand the world you’re legislating for is changing every day,” she told attendees at The Council of State Governments’ National Leadership Conference May 19. “People legislating don’t understand enough the implications of the technologies we’re using and the way these technologies are changing our society.”

So she gave a rundown of some of the hot new tools and how they might be used. An app called Sonar, for example, allows you to walk into a room and instantly gain information about the people in the room through social networking posts and likes.

“Sonar listens to all social networks and ties it to a location,” Webb said. She said it can be the ultimate tool for state policymakers trying to figure out the world around them.

Scene Tap is a program that uses closed circuit cameras to survey a crowd, recognizes people’s faces and provides information about the percentage of men and women, their age range and other information. A bar could use this program to broadcast how popular it is on a Friday night, for example, and push notifications and deals to patrons.

Perhaps the most important technology for monitoring, Webb said, is Face.com, which allows users to upload many pictures quickly and attach people’s names to the photos. It requires face recognition software.

On the flipside, Webb said, are apps that allow you to cloak yourself in real time to avoid these recognition apps.

Using these tools and others that are available and legal, policymakers can do competitive intelligence to learn about constituents and the issues with which they are concerned.

But she also issued a warning to be very careful about using these technologies.

“You are easily tracked,” she said. “It’s very simple for someone who has a little information to paint these broad-stroke pictures. While you can use these tools, keep in mind that they can also be used
Policymakers also can use these new technologies for storytelling, according to Webb. She offered as an example the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, the Florida teenager who was killed by a neighborhood watch captain.

“This was a local story,” she said. “What caused the national attention was the digital groundswell.”

Activists and constituents use these technologies, Webb said, while many policymakers don’t. “And you should,” she said.

Storify.com, for example, allows users to create a multimedia story package that goes well beyond the standard press release, she said. Once policymakers have a Storify channel, they can embed the link in a release for reporters to access and post on other websites. It allows the policymaker to control the story, she said.

Another site that may not be top of mind for policymakers is Pinterest, “the social network that everybody wants to take to the prom right now,” Webb said.

“It doesn’t seem to be the place to tell your position on fracking or diabetes,” she said, “but it is a place that helps people understand the ideas.”

Like Facebook, Pinterest allows people to follow other people and can be a place for policymakers to explain their positions.

“We’re living in an age where we are constantly in communication because of technology, so you might as well take advantage of it,” Webb said.

Technology also can be used to advance your position or agenda. Many politicians depend on Gallup polling to test an idea, which serves an insular group fairly well, she said.

“Outside of your group, there are ways to test public opinion in real time,” Webb said. “Real traditional companies haven’t gotten to the place where that happens yet.”

Data Sift, for one, monitors everything that happens with phones or computers to gauge sentiment on a particular topic. It also shows users the people who are getting the most attention on the Web based on their use of, and following for, such programs as Twitter, according to Webb.

“There are lots of tools out there that you don’t have to wait for a newspaper poll to see whether you and your cause are doing well,” she said.

Policymakers, Webb said, should consider the digital influence “when it comes time to think about next election cycle, next bill you are trying to get passed.”

Resources

- Technology for Monitoring: Sonar [3], SceneTap [4], Spokeo [5]
- Technology for Storytelling: Storify [6], Change [7], Popvox [8]
Also in this Issue:

- Politics at the Speed of the Net [12]
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