



Social Media in Rulemaking

Committee on Rulemaking

Proposed Recommendation | December 5-6, 2013

1 In the last decade, the notice-and-comment rulemaking process has changed from a
2 paper process to an electronic one. Many anticipated that this transition to “e-Rulemaking”¹
3 would precipitate a “revolution,” making rulemaking not just more efficient, but also more
4 broadly participatory, democratic, and dialogic. But these grand hopes have not yet been
5 realized. Although notice-and-comment rulemaking is now conducted electronically, the
6 process remains otherwise recognizable and has undergone no fundamental transformation.

7 At the same time, the Internet has continued to evolve, moving from static, text-based
8 websites to dynamic multi-media platforms that facilitate more participatory, dialogic activities
9 and support large amounts of user-generated content. These “social media” broadly include
10 any online tool that facilitates two-way communication, collaboration, interaction, or sharing
11 between agencies and the public. Examples of social media tools currently in widespread use
12 include Facebook, Twitter, Ideascale, blogs, and various crowdsourcing² platforms. But

¹ The Conference has previously defined “e-Rulemaking” as “the use of digital technologies in the development and implementation of regulations before or during the informal process, i.e., notice-and-comment rulemaking under the Administrative Procedure Act (APA).” Recommendation 2011-1, *Legal Considerations in e-Rulemaking*, 76 Fed. Reg. 48,789, 48,789 (Aug. 9, 2011) (internal quotation marks and footnote omitted).

² “Crowdsourcing” is an umbrella term that includes various techniques for distributed problem-solving or production, drawing on the cumulative knowledge or labor of a large number of people. Wikipedia, the development of the Linux operating system, Amazon.com’s “Mechanical Turk” platform, and public and private challenges that award a prize to the best solution to a particular problem are all examples of crowdsourcing.



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13 technology evolves quickly, continuously, and unpredictably. It is a near certainty that the tools
14 so familiar to us today will grow or fade into obsolescence, while new tools emerge.³

15 The accessible, dynamic, and dialogic character of social media makes it a promising set
16 of tools to fulfill the promise of e-Rulemaking. Thus, for example, the e-Rulemaking Program
17 Management Office, which operates the federal government’s primary online rulemaking
18 portal, Regulations.gov, has urged agencies to “[e]xplore the use of the latest technologies, to
19 the extent feasible and permitted by law, to engage the public in improving federal decision-
20 making and help illustrate the impact of emerging Internet technologies on the federal
21 regulatory process.”⁴ The Conference has similarly, albeit more modestly, recommended that
22 “[a]gencies should consider, in appropriate rulemakings, using social media tools to raise the
23 visibility of rulemakings.”⁵

24 Federal agencies have embraced social media to serve a variety of non-rulemaking
25 purposes,⁶ but few have experimented with such tools in the rulemaking context. One

³ One type of emerging technology includes structured argumentation tools. These tools may take the form of, for example, interactive feedback forms that ask direct and progressively more focused questions in sequence or in response to input, thereby generating more targeted and substantively useful input from users.

⁴ E-RULEMAKING PROGRAM MANAGEMENT OFFICE, IMPROVING ELECTRONIC DOCKETS ON REGULATIONS.GOV AND THE FEDERAL DOCKET MANAGEMENT SYSTEM: BEST PRACTICES FOR FEDERAL AGENCIES 8 (2010), available at http://exchange.regulations.gov/exchange/sites/default/files/doc_files/20101130_eRule_Best_Practices_Document_rev.pdf.

⁵ Recommendation 2011-8, *Agency Innovations in e-Rulemaking*, 77 Fed. Reg. 2257, 2265 (Jan. 17, 2012). The Conference has consistently supported full and effective public participation in rulemaking, as well as the use of new technologies to enhance such participation. In Recommendation 95-3, *Review of Existing Agency Regulations*, the Conference encouraged agencies to “provide adequate opportunity for public involvement in both the priority-setting and review processes,” including by “requesting comments through electronic bulletin boards or other means of electronic communication.” 60 Fed. Reg. 43,108, 43,109 (Aug. 18, 1995).

⁶ For example, agencies have enthusiastically embraced social media, including Facebook and Twitter, as an effective tool for pushing information out to the public, from general information about an agency and its mission to more specific notifications of services, benefits, or employment opportunities that are available from an agency. Agencies have also used social media in more interactive ways, such as when nearly three dozen agencies used Ideascale to engage the public in the process of developing the agencies’ Open Government Plans or when the Consumer Financial Protection Board used metadata generated by a “heat map” to better understand how consumers would react to different proposed versions of a disclosure form.



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26 explanation for this reluctance is uncertainty about how the Administrative Procedure Act
27 (APA) and other requirements of administrative law apply to the use of social media,
28 particularly during the process governed by the APA's informal rulemaking requirements,
29 beginning when the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) has been issued, through the
30 comment period, and until the agency issues a final rule.⁷ In particular, agencies are uncertain
31 whether public contributions to a blog or Facebook discussion are "comments" for purposes of
32 the APA, thus triggering the agencies' obligations to review and respond to the contributions
33 and include them in the rulemaking record. Other concerns include how the Paperwork
34 Reduction Act applies to agency inquiries through social media,⁸ whether the First Amendment
35 might limit an agency from moderating a social media discussion, and how individual agencies'
36 "ex parte" communications policies might apply to the use of social media.

37 Apart from legal concerns are doubts as to whether, when, and how social media will
38 benefit rulemaking. These doubts arise with respect to two distinct issues that often overlap.
39 First, can social media be used to generate more useful public input in rulemaking? Second, is
40 increased lay participation in rulemaking likely to be valuable? Experience suggests that both
41 the quality of comments and the level of participation in social media discussions are often
42 much lower than one might hope. A third-party facilitator may be able to help an agency
43 address these issues by encouraging public participation, helping participants understand the
44 rulemaking process and the agency's proposal, asking follow-up questions to produce more
45 substantive input, and actively facilitating engagement among participants. Regardless of
46 whether a third-party facilitator is used, however, creating the conditions necessary to foster a

⁷ The Conference recently addressed legal issues related to e-rulemaking in Recommendation 2011-1, *Legal Considerations in e-Rulemaking*, see *supra* note 1, but did not delve into the unique concerns that arise when agencies use social media to support rulemaking activities.

⁸ The Office of Management and Budget has issued helpful guidance on these issues. See Memorandum from Cass R. Sunstein, Adm'r, Office of Info. & Regulatory Affairs, to the Heads of Executive Departments and Independent Regulatory Agencies regarding Social Media, Web-Based Interactive Technologies, and the Paperwork Reduction Act (Apr. 7, 2010), available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/assets/inforeg/SocialMediaGuidance_04072010.pdf.



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47 meaningful, productive dialogue among participants requires commitment, time, and
48 thoughtful design. Since this kind of innovation can be costly, agencies are understandably
49 reluctant to expend scarce resources in pursuit of uncertain benefits. Agencies also face a
50 variety of practical questions. One such question is whether to require participants to identify
51 themselves in agency-sponsored social media discussions. Another concern is that the use of
52 ranking or voting tools may mislead some to believe that rulemaking is a plebiscite or allow
53 some participants to improperly manipulate the discussion.

54 Social media can be valuable during the notice-and-comment phase of rulemaking, but
55 on a selected basis. For example, if an agency needs to reach an elusive audience or determine
56 public preferences or reactions in order to develop an effective regulation, social media may
57 enable the collection of information and data that are rarely reflected in traditional rulemaking
58 comments. Success requires an agency to thoughtfully identify the purpose(s) of using social
59 media, carefully select the appropriate social media tool(s), and integrate those tools into the
60 traditional notice-and-comment process. In addition, agencies must clearly communicate to the
61 public how the social media discussion will be used in the rulemaking. Although the APA allows
62 agencies the flexibility to be innovative, attention should be given to how the APA or other legal
63 requirements will apply in the circumstances of a particular rulemaking.

64 Agencies may find, however, that it is both easier and more often valuable to use social
65 media in connection with rulemaking activities, but outside the notice-and-comment process.
66 For example, social media can be effective for public outreach, helping to increase public
67 awareness of agency activities, including opportunities to contribute to policy setting, rule
68 development, or the evaluation of existing regulatory regimes. The use of social media may
69 also be particularly appropriate during the pre-rulemaking or policy-development phase. Here,
70 the APA and other legal restrictions do not apply, and agencies are often seeking dispersed
71 knowledge or answers to more open-ended questions that lend themselves to productive
72 discussion through social media. For the same reasons, social media may be an effective way
73 for agencies to seek input on retrospective review of existing regulations. It also may be helpful



74 in connection with a negotiated rulemaking,⁹ where these tools may make it easier for the
75 diverse interests to collaborate during and between meetings on a solution to the problem
76 being addressed.

77 This recommendation provides guidance to agencies on whether, how, and when social
78 media might be used both lawfully and effectively to support rulemaking activities. It seeks to
79 identify broad principles susceptible of application to any social media tool that is now available
80 or may be developed in the future. It is intended to encourage innovation and facilitate the
81 experimentation necessary to develop the most effective techniques for leveraging the
82 strengths of social media to achieve the promises of e-Rulemaking.

RECOMMENDATION

83 1. Agencies should explore in the rulemaking process the use of social media—online
84 platforms that can provide broad opportunities for public consultation, discussion, and
85 engagement.

86 **Public Outreach**

87 2. Agencies should use social media to inform and educate the public about agency
88 activities, their rulemaking process in general, and specific rulemakings. Agencies should take
89 an expansive approach to alerting potential participants to upcoming rulemakings by posting to
90 the agency website and sending notifications through multiple social media channels. Social
91 media may provide a more effective means to reach interested persons who have traditionally
92 been underrepresented in the rulemaking process.

93 3. Agencies should recognize that raising awareness among missing stakeholders (those
94 directly affected by the proposed rule who are historically unlikely to participate in the
95 traditional comment process) and other potential new participants in the rulemaking process

⁹ See, e.g., Recommendation 85-5, *Procedures for Negotiating Proposed Regulations* (Dec. 13, 1985).



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96 will require new outreach strategies beyond simply giving notice in the *Federal Register*,
97 Regulations.gov, and the agency website. Social media may be particularly effective for
98 successful outreach, and agencies using it for this purpose in connection with rulemaking
99 should consider:

100 (a) Developing one or more communications plans specifically tailored to the rule and
101 to all types of missing stakeholders or other potential new participants the agency is
102 trying to engage. These plans should be evenhanded and designed to encourage all
103 types of stakeholders to participate.

104 (b) In outreach messages, clearly explaining the mechanisms through which members
105 of the public can participate in the rulemaking, what the role of public comments is, and
106 how the agency will take comments into account.

107 (c) Encouraging public response by being clear and specific about how the proposed
108 rule would affect the targeted participants and what input will be most useful to the
109 agency.

110 (d) Asking all interested organizations to spread the participation message to members
111 or followers. Agencies should be prepared to explain why individual participation can
112 be beneficial, and to encourage organizations to solicit substantive, individualized
113 comments from their members.

114 (e) Using multilingual social media outlets where appropriate.

115 4. The General Services Administration, the e-Rulemaking Program Management Office,
116 and other federal agencies, either individually or (preferably) collaboratively, should use social
117 media to create and distribute more robust educational programs about rulemaking. These
118 efforts could include: producing videos about the rulemaking process and how to effectively
119 participate through commenting and posting on an agency website or video-sharing website;
120 hosting webinars in which agency personnel discuss how to draft useful and helpful comments;



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121 maintaining an online database of exemplary rulemaking comments; or conducting an online
122 class or webinar or providing explanatory materials in which officials review a draft comment
123 and suggest ways to improve it.

124 5. Agencies should explore ways to publicize, and allow members of the public to
125 receive, regular, automated updates on developments in, at a minimum, significant
126 rulemakings.

127 6. Agencies should consider using social media prior to the publication of an NPRM or
128 proposed policy where the goal is to understand the current state of affairs, collect dispersed
129 knowledge, or identify problems. To enhance the amount and value of public input, an agency
130 seeking to engage the public for these purposes should, to the maximum extent possible, make
131 clear the sort of information it is seeking and how the agency intends to use public input
132 received in this way. The agency should also directly engage with participants by
133 acknowledging submissions, asking follow-up questions, and providing substantive responses.

134 7. Agencies should consider using social media in support of retrospective review of
135 existing regulations, particularly to learn what actual experience has been under the relevant
136 regulation(s).

137 **Using Social Media in Notice-and-Comment Rulemaking**

138 8. Although the use of social media may not be appropriate and productive in all
139 rulemakings, agencies may use social media to supplement or improve the traditional
140 commenting process. Before using social media in connection with a particular rulemaking,
141 agencies should identify the specific goals they expect to achieve through the use of social
142 media and carefully consider the potential costs and benefits.

143 9. Agencies should use the social media tools that best fit their particular purposes and
144 goals and should carefully consider how to effectively integrate those tools into the traditional
145 rulemaking process.



146 **Effective Approaches for Using Social Media in Rulemaking**

147 10. For each rulemaking, agencies should consider maintaining a blog or other
148 appropriate social media site dedicated to that rulemaking for purposes of providing
149 information, updates, and clarifications regarding the scope and progress of the rulemaking.
150 Agencies may also wish to explore using such a site to generate a dialogue.

151 11. When an agency sponsors a social media discussion in connection with a notice-
152 and-comment rulemaking, it should determine and prominently indicate to the public how the
153 discussion will be treated under the APA (for administrative record purposes). The agency may
154 decide, for example:

155 (a) To include all comments submitted via an agency-administered social media
156 discussion in the rulemaking record. Agencies should consider using an application
157 programming interface (API) or other appropriate technological tool to efficiently
158 transfer content from social media to the rulemaking record.

159 (b) That no part of the social media discussion will be included in the rulemaking
160 docket, that the agency will not consider the discussion in developing the rule, and that
161 the agency will not respond to the discussion. An agency that selects this option should
162 communicate the restriction clearly to the public through conspicuous disclaimers on
163 the social media site itself, provide instructions on how to submit an official comment to
164 the rulemaking docket, and provide a convenient mechanism for doing so. It is
165 especially important in these circumstances that the agency clearly explain the purpose
166 of a social media discussion the agency does not intend to consider in the rulemaking.



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167 12. When soliciting input through a social media platform, agencies should provide a
168 version of the NPRM that is “friendly” and clear to lay users. This involves, for example,
169 breaking preambles into smaller components by subject, summarizing those components in
170 plain language, layering more complete versions of the preamble below the summaries, and
171 providing hyperlinked definitions of key terms. In doing this, the agency should either:

172 (a) Publish both versions of the NPRM in the *Federal Register*; or

173 (b) Cross-reference the user-friendly version of the NPRM in the published NPRM and
174 cross-reference the published NPRM in the user-friendly version of the NPRM.

175 13. Agencies should consider, in appropriate rulemakings, retaining facilitator services
176 to manage rulemaking discussions conducted through social media. Appropriate rulemakings
177 may include those in which:

178 (a) Targeted users are inexperienced commenters who may need help to prepare an
179 effective comment (e.g., providing comments that give reasons rather than just
180 reactions); or

181 (b) The issues will predictably produce sharply divided or highly emotional reactions.

182 14. Agencies should realize that not all rulemakings will be enhanced by a
183 crowdsourcing approach. However, when the issue to be addressed is the public or user
184 response itself (e.g., when the agency seeks to determine the best format for a consumer
185 notice), direct submission to the public at large may lead to useful information. In addition,
186 agencies should consider encouraging, and being receptive to, comments from lay stakeholders
187 with “situated knowledge” arising out of their real world experience.

188 15. Agencies should consider experimenting with collaborative drafting platforms, both
189 internally and, potentially, externally, for purposes of producing regulatory documents.



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190 16. If an agency chooses to use voting or ranking tools, the agency should explain to the
191 public how it intends to use the input generated through those tools.

192 17. Agencies should use social media to notify and educate the public about the final
193 agency action produced through a rulemaking.

194 18. In appropriate circumstances, agencies should also use social media to provide
195 compliance information.

196 19. Agencies should collaborate to identify best practices for addressing issues that
197 arise in connection with the use of social media in rulemaking.

198 **Direct Final Rulemaking**

199 20. Agencies should consider using social media before or in connection with direct final
200 rulemaking to quickly identify whether there are significant or meaningful objections that are
201 not initially apparent.

202 **Key Legal Considerations**

203 21. Agencies have maximum flexibility under the APA to use social media before an
204 NPRM is issued or after a final rule has been promulgated.

205 22. Agencies should consider how the First Amendment applies to facilitating or hosting
206 social media discussions. Agencies should also make it clear through a posted comment policy
207 that all discussions and comments on any given agency social media site will be moderated in a
208 uniform, viewpoint-neutral manner. Through this posted policy, agencies may decide to define
209 or restrict the topics of discussion, impose reasonable limitations to preserve decorum,
210 decency, and prevent spam or, alternatively, terminate a social media discussion altogether.

211 23. Agencies that have “ex parte” contact policies for information obtained in
212 connection with rulemaking should review those policies to ensure they address
213 communications made through social media.