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First Rule for Social Media Use: Do No Harm

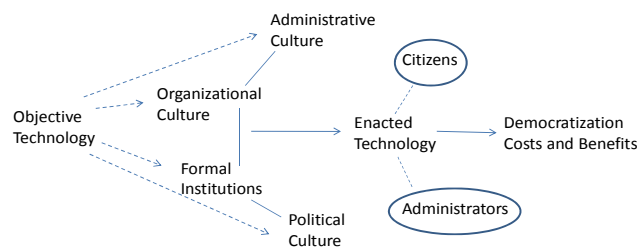
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Key Findings

Social media tools (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Wiki, Google+) are designed to facilitate social interaction. However, government agencies have been found to primarily use these tools as just another means for unidirectional communication with citizens. Failure to use social tools in a social manner risks alienating citizens, potentially reducing trust in government, rather than increasing trust. This is something we can label the “costs of democratization.”

Government agencies, as well as nonprofit organizations, implement technologies with built in biases. The “objective technologies” (social media used in a social

Democratization Costs and Benefits Framework: An Adaptation of Fountain’s (2001) Technology Enactment Theory



manner) are filtered through an organization’s culture and rules, the perceptions about the role of the agency with citizens (“administrative culture”) and the general perception of the role of citizens in governance (“political culture”). The resulting use of

social media—and other technologies—is a potential perversion of what is possible given the technological capacity. Citizens and agency officials must work to build their capacities to avoid costs of democratization.

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Recommendations for Practice

1. Develop the capacity of government and nonprofit agency officials to use social media for engaging with citizens. Use of social media should be strategic, recognizing the unique features and potential uses of each social media tool.

2. Use the social features of social media to educate the citizenry. Government policies and programs are often complex; if citizens are to be meaningfully engaged, they must be better prepared.

3. Be open to learn. There is a good chance that citizens have ideas about the uses of technology within the governance process. Tap into that expertise, and make use of outside panels to develop your social media strategies.

