

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies increasingly use recently developed Internet technologies that allow individuals or groups to create, organize, comment on, and share online content. The use of these social media services—including popular Web sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube—has been endorsed by President Obama and provides opportunities for agencies to more readily share information with and solicit feedback from the public. However, these services may also pose risks to the adequate protection of both personal and government information.

GAO was asked to (1) describe how federal agencies are currently using commercially provided social media services and (2) determine the extent to which agencies have developed and implemented policies and procedures for managing and protecting information associated with this use. To do this, GAO examined the headquarters-level Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and YouTube channels of 24 major federal agencies; reviewed pertinent policies, procedures, and guidance; and interviewed officials involved in agency use of social media.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that agencies ensure that appropriate records management, privacy, and security measures are in place. Most of the agencies agreed with GAO's recommendations. Three agencies did not agree with recommendations made to them; GAO maintains that the actions are necessary.

View [GAO-11-605](#) or key components. For more information, contact Gregory C. Wilshusen at (202) 512-6244 or wilshusen@gao.gov.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Federal Agencies Need Policies and Procedures for Managing and Protecting Information They Access and Disseminate

What GAO Found

Federal agencies have been adapting commercially provided social media technologies to support their missions. Specifically, GAO identified several distinct ways that 23 of 24 major agencies are using Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These include reposting information available on official agency Web sites, posting information not otherwise available on agency Web sites, soliciting comments from the public, responding to comments on posted content, and providing links to non-government sites. For example, agencies used Facebook to post pictures or descriptions of the activities of agency officials and to interact with the public. Agencies used Twitter to provide information in an abbreviated format and to direct the public back to official agency sites. YouTube was used to provide alternate means of accessing videos available on official agency sites, share videos of agency officials discussing topics of interest, or to solicit feedback from the public.

The use of these services can pose challenges in managing and identifying records, protecting personal information, and ensuring the security of federal information and systems. However, the 23 major agencies that GAO identified as using social media have made mixed progress in developing and implementing policies and procedures to address these challenges:

- **Records management:** 12 of the 23 agencies have developed and issued guidance that outlines processes and policies for identifying and managing records generated by their use of social media and record-keeping roles and responsibilities.
- **Privacy:** 12 agencies have updated their privacy policies to describe whether they use personal information made available through social media, and 8 conducted and documented privacy impact assessments to identify potential privacy risks that may exist in using social media given the likelihood that personal information will be made available to the agency by the public.
- **Security:** 7 agencies identified and documented security risks (such as the potential for an attacker to use social media to collect information and launch attacks against federal information systems) and mitigating controls associated with their use of social media.

In several cases, agencies reported having policies in development to address these issues. In other cases, agencies reported that there was no need to have policies or procedures that specifically address the use of social media, since these are addressed in existing policies. However, social media technologies present unique challenges and risks, and without establishing guidance and assessing risks specific to social media, agencies cannot be assured that they are adequately meeting their responsibilities to manage and preserve federal records, protect the privacy of personal information, and secure federal systems and information against threats.