Casebook:

The Power of Social Networking Technology to Change Policy, Practice and Management

By Kathleen Feely and Sam Gill

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It is virtually impossible to overstate the extent to which the Internet has changed personal and commercial life. Since 1995, when the Netscape browser first came into wide use, Internet use has climbed from 14 percent of the American adult population to 79 percent *(http://www.pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data/Internet-Adoption.aspx)*.

If the first Internet revolution was its wide adoption as a personal and business platform, then the second Internet revolution has undoubtedly been the recent explosion in Web 2.0 and social networking technologies. Facebook went live at Harvard in 2004. Today it has 600 million users worldwide and estimated annual revenues of $2 billion. YouTube launched in 2005. By May 2010 it reported receiving 2 billion views per day. Twitter opened to the public in 2006 and now has 200 million users worldwide.

These technologies have changed how people lead their social lives, fundamentally altered marketing and communications, played a supporting role in several watershed political uprisings in the Middle East, and transformed the character of politics in America.

They have also had an enormous impact on how private-sector businesses operate. According to a series of studies by McKinsey and Company on the impact of Web 2.0 on major corporations, 69 percent of businesses that have begun to use Web 2.0 technologies report "measurable business benefits" such as reduced costs, improved employee satisfaction, better knowledge access and better revenue *(http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/How_companies_are_benefiting_from_Web_20_McKinsey_Global_Survey_Results_2432)*. Harvard Business School Professor John Quelch estimates that Internet-related industries employ about 3 million Americans (whose wages total $300 billion) and generate close to half a trillion dollars in direct and indirect economic activity *(http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6268.html)*.

While the private sector has raced ahead in adopting these technologies, public human service agencies and providers have continued to fall further

and further behind. This is not because those in human services do not want access to the best technology available. It is, in large part, because policy and fiscal constraints, powerful financial disincentives for change, and constraining procurement processes have frustrated efforts to implement technology innovation in an effective way.

A new approach in child welfare called Casebook, supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, has helped spur a growing conversation about how technology innovation and Web 2.0 tools can genuinely transform policy, management and practice in human services.

Like many human service fields, child welfare suffers from the volatile mix of high caseloads and information management technology that doesn't meet user needs. There are a few more than 3 million referrals to state child protective services agencies annually, and at any time more than 400,000 children are in foster care *(http://www. childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/foster. pdf#page=3)*.

Providing services to these children and their families is a complex undertaking for even the most seasoned caseworker. A 2003 study mapped the journey many children, families and caseworkers may travel to ensure children make it to safe, supportive environments. All told, this journey may include up to 13 "decision points" that involve child protective services, the police, the courts, birth parents, foster parents, a shelter or residential home, relatives and often many others *(http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploaded-Files/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Foster_ care_reform/childsjourney%5B1%5D. pdf)*. While it is recommended that front-line caseworkers who serve these children and families carry no more than 12–15 cases, the reality is that in many states they serve twice that

number *(http://www.gao.gov/new. items/d03357.pdf)*.

The current environment creates real challenges for caseworkers, administrators and policymakers alike. Caseworkers and supervisors have to make critical, life-shaping decisions based on fragmented, inaccurate and out-of-date information. Agency managers lack the ability to spot trends quickly, deploy services efficiently and allocate funds effectively and to improve performance across jurisdictions. Policymakers are forced to rely on inadequate data as they determine the future of programs.

Casebook uses established and emerging Web 2.0 and social networking technologies to address some of the problems in case management and support effective practice in two ways. First, Casebook's capabilities demonstrate the role that new technology can play in paving the way for 21st century practice changes long sought in human services. Second, Casebook also points to a more fundamental transformation in the way that human services are organized and integrated.

Casebook began at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which has a long history of supporting innovative reforms in child welfare and human services. Well before the Internet began to dominate public and business life, the foundation invested in reform efforts that relied heavily on analyzing data to inform and shape significant improvements in how agencies and caseworkers did their jobs.

This work ultimately revealed some of the most marked deficiencies in the way that child welfare data were collected and managed. Interviews conducted by the Government Accountability Office have found that some caseworkers claim to spend fully half of their time entering data into these systems *(http://www.gao.gov/ new.items/d03357.pdf)*. Because data

entry was so laborious and disconnected from the actual work of serving children and families, many caseworkers would enter "fake" data into the required fields, in order to move as quickly as possible through the linear screens of their data systems. As a result, data took months to "clean" if it were to be at all meaningful to states working with the foundation in understanding trend lines, assessing length of stay in out-of-home care, or undertaking other analyses necessary to determine how to improve policy and practice.

Because the foundation believed strongly in the importance of good data to developing sound policy and practice, it began investigating the potential of emerging technology—especially in the early 2000s, just as the Web 2.0 and social networking revolution was beginning to take hold.

An important result of the foundation's investments was Casebook, a case management tool designed to help develop and support best practices in child welfare by utilizing Web 2.0 and social networking technology. For the agencies that are beginning to use Casebook in child welfare services, the application provides several new approaches to facilitating and enhancing best practice, management and policymaking:

- **Supporting Best Practice:** Casebook uses a range of technology tools that make consensus-based best practices easier to apply in the course of real-life casework. These include: a rich visual history of families and cases that is built automatically as data are input; graphic visualization of family relationships; matching engines, that can, for example, rank families and services to help caseworkers identify placements likely to succeed; access to real-time data about families that is available to caseworkers and their supervisors; and, case and service plans that reflect all of the people in a family network as well as professionals supporting the family, from other agencies. Significantly, Casebook can easily support virtual case collaboration among multiple users with different roles within the organization and, with the appropriate permissions, across agencies—all without clumsy downloading and uploading processes.

- **Data Aggregation and System Management:** Casebook can help agency directors and policymakers better understand data and trends so they are able to make effective decisions in near real time. Among Casebook's capabilities: fulfilling all federal reporting requirements, including automatic generation of case overview forms and exporting of federally required data elements for selected populations; providing a view of people over time and beyond the scope of individual cases, always helping caseworkers to see people in relationship to families, households or assistance groups, rather than case snapshots; and, capturing both narrative and structured data that prompts user action.

- **Professional Development:** Casebook leverages the Internet as a functionally convenient platform to continue to train caseworkers or encourage effective work habits. Some of these features include: automatic alerts, reminders, checkpoints and prompts that keep case management on track; practice tips and positive feedback to help reinforce good decisions; and, podcasts from a training department to address common casework problems or remind workers of "tools" they may have learned in practice (e.g., "Developmental Signs of a Nine-Month-Old Infant").

Many of Casebook's tools apply technologies used in our personal lives—such as hotel or restaurant ranking sites—to case management. Others are custom tools that orient the underlying technologies for Web 2.0 and social networking applications toward the unique needs of case management. One of the great strengths of the Internet is that it's not inert, as a printed manual or written directive might be. Web-based tools can respond to changes in practice over time, and present information in a way that is easy and engaging for caseworkers to access as they need them.

Yet Casebook also utilizes Web 2.0 and social networking technology to go beyond facilitating current best practices, and instead to begin supporting practice and management innovations that were previously out of reach. The reality is that older generation family information and case management systems simply did not allow for real-time data analysis beyond the level of a single silo or case, nor were they equipped with "smart tools" that could capture data in other parts of the system. These tools came with the Web 2.0 and social networking revolution, and only now are available for supporting human services.

We believe that Casebook's features illustrate the critical role that new technologies can play in affirming and supporting best practices in human service case management, in addition to ushering in the next era of practice and policy improvements. Child welfare

is not the only human service field in which existing information technology sometimes hinders more than it helps. The good news is that the Web 2.0 revolution can change the game for the human services—but only once we learn to harness these new tools.

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The deeper promise of these new information technologies, however, is their potential to help tear down the programmatic silos that have long been an object of frustration in public-sector human services.

We all recognize the cost these silos levy on families and on the human service system. Thanks to myriad federal, state, and sometimes local, regulations on how data are collected, many of our information systems across different human service program areas can't communicate with each other. This means that a state's office of mental health may be entirely blind with regard to child protective services, for example, even if both agencies are helping the same family. This is a problem for the caseworkers who are working hard to coordinate among various agencies to help vulnerable children and families. It's an even greater problem for agency heads and policymakers, who lack an ability to form a composite view of the entire human service system.

For the families who need human services, it's more than a problem—it's yet another barrier. These are our most vulnerable citizens, yet in order to get services, they are required to enter a system that demands hours and hours of time spent giving and re-giving different agencies' intake staff the same basic demographic information, and submitting the same financial records. Whether it's the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, The Children's Health Insurance Program, child care, child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, housing

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or immigration, each human service field has its own information silo that requires families to independently and repetitiously supply the same information. Once all the information has finally been supplied, families must continue to deal separately with all of the siloed systems, and to receive largely uncoordinated services from them. For the families who have to navigate more than one silo, this diffuse human service structure can be at once confusing, daunting and exhausting.

Technology is primed to respond to these challenges. One approach, embraced by some, is to help the various silos "speak" to each other better. The underlying technology to enable this kind of communication varies, but the basic concept is to allow legacy data silos in different program areas to remain intact, allowing data to flow between silos as appropriate.

While this approach would represent progress, its primary shortcomings are, first, that it is expensive and, second, that it allows the human service sector to continue to focus on individual cases, rather than, for example, groups of persons, such as families, households or assistance groups (or all three), all out of one database.

In Casebook, by contrast, families—made up of persons and relationships—sit at the center. Casebook's flexible data architecture allows expert personnel from "silo agencies" to have access to service plans, and other "fixed" elements of a case that are associated with the family. Rather than helping connect silos to each other, the Casebook approach suggests that we develop and pursue a different and more far-reaching model: create a repository of shared information from which all silos could draw. Privacy concerns are real, but they can be respected. Data elements could be designed to restrict access only to those agencies or individuals with adequate legal permission.

Under this model, families would

need only to provide their personal information and financial information one, or possibly two, times. The most time-consuming contact they would have with the human service system would be their first contact, and even that would be made much easier with the aid of better data collection tools. After this initial point of contact, the human service system would be able to organize itself to meet the unique needs of the family.

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Beyond these two lessons—how Web 2.0 and social networking technology can improve human service policy and practice, and how it might fundamentally transform the architecture of our human service system—early efforts with Casebook have also yielded critical insights for those in the human services who want to adopt an innovation agenda, but who face barriers at every turn:

♦ **Don't Bifurcate Technology and Policy:** too often, technologists and policymakers (or practitioners) see themselves as wholly separate, if not in opposition. In the 21st century, technologists and policymakers need to work very closely together. They should attend meetings together and develop and implement organizational and technological strategies in tandem. Technology is an indispensable tool, but only as a means to an end. An organizational strategy that does not put technology to use cannot succeed in the modern era.

♦ **Take Smart Risks:** innovation can't happen absent a willingness to take chances. Policy and institutional barriers raise the stakes of technology

innovations, which can appear costly from a distance. Yet how human service policymakers and practitioners decide to use technology will be the most significant decisions they make over the coming decades. Identifying lower-cost ways to improve the quality of technology and, ultimately, human service delivery, will determine whether a human service agency succeeds or fails in the 21st century.

♦ **Advocate for Technology:** right now many public-sector human service agencies are up against the wall. Budgets are tight and demand is high. There are many causes worthy of advocacy, but we cannot let technology get lost in the shuffle. Explaining the need for better data and information systems, and advocating effectively for those systems, will be the key to determining whether agencies will continue to provide quality services to children and families in the future.

Casebook is currently being prepared for deployment as the child protective services system of record in Indiana and has already been deployed with Casey Family Services, the direct service arm of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It has shown great promise as a family information and case management system in the field of child welfare, but its lessons should be of use throughout human services.

The reality is that technology offers the same promise for human services as it did for the private sector over a decade ago. Emerging Web 2.0 and social networking technologies make it easier to do what we know works. They also make possible many of the things we thought were impossible, especially when it comes to genuinely integrated services.

Private-sector companies didn't think twice when the Internet came along, nor did most individuals. All saw the transformative potential and acted. The human-service sector now sits at a similar juncture. We can't afford to wait.