



# The Fallacy of Control

White Paper by DAN WILLIS

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**It is March 8, 2005 and you are Robert Mueller,** head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. You were a decorated officer for the Marines in Vietnam and before becoming the FBI Director four years ago, you had a long law career with success in both the public sector and private practice.

At a February hearing, Senator Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., described your failed project as a “train wreck in slow motion” and now in this follow-up session, the Congressional subcommittee’s chairman, Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., is demanding a guarantee that is impossible for you, or anyone else, to make.

“Can you tell us how you guarantee there won’t be a third failure?” Wolf demands.

You are sitting in this hearing, in this painful silence, in this predicament as a direct result of the fallacy of control.

The term “fallacy of control” comes from mental health counselors who use it to describe a philosophical approach to life that greatly increases the likelihood of stress and anxiety. Individuals who believe in this fallacy feel they should be able to control all things and get frustrated with the reality that so many things are out of their control.

The fallacy of control is also a good description for a major obstacle in the current effort to make federal agencies more transparent, participatory, and collaborative. The goal of the Open Government movement is to transform government, but that can’t occur until individuals and their agencies loosen their white-knuckled grip on antiquated processes and outdated traditions.

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## Virtual Case File

Rep. Wolf never got his guarantee from Robert Mueller in that 2005 hearing.

The FBI director abandoned the Virtual Case File (VCF) project despite the four years and more than \$100 million wasted on the effort. The FBI and the project's contractor traded accusations of blame for the debacle, while various auditors argued about the actual amount of taxpayer money lost. Mueller assured the Congressional subcommittee that the Bureau wouldn't repeat the management and process mistakes of the VCF project as it started over with a replacement solution.<sup>1</sup>



**Mueller**

Improvements in process and IT management were clearly needed, but VCF's 730,000 lines of custom code (created from scratch rather than modified from commercial off-the-shelf software) suggest that control issues may have been a factor as well. The Bureau's decentralized confederation of 56 field offices resulted in an organization deeply distrustful of technology and loathe to share information.<sup>2</sup> Within the secretive and intimidating atmosphere, a team of FBI agents with little or no IT experience used flawed requirements in a misguided attempt to dictate interface design and application logic.

"The customer should be saying 'This is what we need,' " said Sherry Higgins, the initial FBI program manager for the project, "and the contractor should be saying 'Here's how we're going to deliver it' and those lines were never clear. The culture within the FBI was 'We're going to tell you how to do it.'"<sup>3</sup>

Ken Orr, an advisor for the FBI on the VCF project, said: "The problem at the FBI appears to be mostly cultural. And that's orders of magnitude harder to correct than a project management problem."<sup>4</sup>

## CULTURE OF CONTROL

A culture of control isn't unique to the FBI. Numerous organizations in the federal government have reputations for restricting the input of contractors and otherwise limiting the impact of outside expertise.

"In many government agencies, such 'proprietary' information is often hoarded and rarely shared with even peer agencies," said Satish Nambisan, Associate Professor

of Technology Management and Strategy at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

"As such, the notion of sharing with external partners (for example, citizens) is likely to be particularly difficult to comprehend for many organization members and would call for concerted effort in organizational change from agency heads."<sup>5</sup>

Recent successes in opening up government have been as much about cultural change as they have been about innovation. The migration of USA.gov, one of the federal government's busiest Web sites, to a cloud platform should cut infrastructure costs by as much as 90 percent, but building support within the agency for the move was still a major effort.

"This isn't a story about technology. It's a story of culture," said Martha Dorris acting associate administrator for the General Services Administration's Office of Citizen Services and Communications.

"Our technology team did not want to give up the servers. We spend a lot of time moving people along."<sup>6</sup>

Before he was named Federal CIO, Vivek Kundra was the unconventional Chief Technology Officer for the District of Columbia where he posted the bidding process for municipal contracts on YouTube, encouraged staff to use Twitter as a communication tool, and treated D.C. residents as equal partners in the development of solutions.



**Kundra**

Some of the District's agencies resisted Kundra's efforts to make city health and crime data available to residents and outside Web developers and while he secured \$1 million in private sector donations for a technology classroom, there was grumbling about much weaker efforts to address the needs of new and renovated schools.

"Sure, it's sometimes hard to get people on board," said Kundra at the time, "but I keep pushing."<sup>7</sup>

According to Beth Noveck, U.S. Deputy Chief Technology Officer for Open Government, unconventional agency leaders have plenty of support from the rank and file.

"The innovators across the government who, I think, are in large part already there, want to do this. They want to be more innovative and more open. But they need to also be given the freedom to do so and to be encouraged and rewarded in their jobs and told that this is not only behavior that's approved of, but behavior that will be rewarded."<sup>8</sup>



## HOLDING TIGHT

Robert Kennedy said: "Progress is a nice word. But change is its motivator. And change has its enemies."

The key question for agencies is whether or not the bureaucratic status quo will outlast current efforts to distribute control and transform government.

The massive number of retiring Baby Boomers combined with a shortage in the next generation of workers to replace them will have a direct impact on how agencies respond to change. Just 45 million Generation X workers (people born between 1965 and 1980) are available to replace 78 million retiring Baby Boomers and as a result, younger "Millennials" will be promoted earlier in their careers and go on to dominate the workforce for the next 70 years.<sup>9</sup>

Open Government efforts gain urgency and a sense of inevitability from the 40 million Millennials already working and the additional 35 million who will soon come of age.

Another factor that could put pressure on traditional government agency control comes from the nature of data itself. At the tech industry's first Think Conference back in 1984, author Stewart Brand suggested: "Information wants to be free."<sup>10</sup> Agencies hoping to resist this and the many other internal and external catalysts for change may have a difficult time of it.

The resources required to enforce control tend to escalate over time and this is one of the reasons attempts at total

control so often fail. The first Fascist government, in Italy under the thumb of Benito Mussolini, lasted less than 20 years; the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution banning the sale of alcohol was struck down after just 13 years.

At the end of the 20th century, technological innovation disrupted the U.S. music industry's ability to control creative content. Desperate companies squeezed tighter in response:

"When it first became clear that analog assets would become digital liabilities, most producers and publishers reacted by rejecting the whole of it. They thought that by suing enough people - device makers, software programmers, Web site publishers - they could shut down any innovation that would expose them to digital competition. Sadly, some even stooped to suing their customers. At the same time, they worked hard to create their own digital rights management technology that would effectively neuter digital content and make it act a lot like analog content."

- James L. McQuivey, Ph.D.

"How To Rebuild The Media Industries" <sup>11</sup>

Unwise media practices continue into this century. Academic and political activist Lawrence Lessig compares one music industry experiment to the agricultural practice of sharecropping.



Lessig

"When David Bowie tries to jump into the mashup/remix world by offering prizes for the best remix of his content, but demanding the rights to all the creativity produced by the remixers, he's violating a Web 2.0 principle, and by doing so, weakening the extraordinary potential his effort could have. Put differently, sharecropping is no

better a strategy for the virtual world than it was in the physical world."<sup>12</sup>

Some federal government agencies are likely to respond to impending disruption as badly as the music industry. Like music publishers, agencies had for decades controlled their content by controlling the mechanisms of content distribution. The music industry controlled record, tape, and CD production; government agencies controlled

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printed reports and access to proprietary databases. But the Internet has blown up the traditional bundling of content and content distribution mechanism so a song is no longer bound to a physical object and agency data is no longer restricted to an official report.



## LETTING GO

“Do you know how, along the side or end of some pool tables, there is a slot or trough where the balls go when they’re sunk? Well this dog had reached his mouth into the trough of the pool table and locked his jaws around the sunken balls. No way was he about to let go of his prize - but neither could he remove his mouth. His jaws opened wide to accommodate the ball, were consequently opened too wide to allow him to escape the confines of the trough. So there he stood, dead still, except for the now-and-then, hope-against-hope wag of his tail.

“Poor dog. I left the restaurant feeling both sad for the mutt and fascinated by the lesson he’d provided: If we do not let go, we make prisoners of ourselves.”

- Gordon MacKenzie,  
*Orbiting the Giant Hairball*<sup>13</sup>

The Internet severely disrupts laws that were originally designed for print-specific rights. Lawrence Lessig and a

stellar group of cyberlaw and intellectual property experts founded Creative Commons in 2001 to provide a supplement to existing copyrights that keeps creators protected while maintaining the relevance of those copyrights as new distribution channels emerge. Creative Commons helps creators release control of some aspects of their work, while maintaining it for others. For example, a musician may not mind if other artists remix or otherwise build on their work, as long as credit for the original piece is given; or they may prefer there be no alterations, but don’t mind others distributing their work. Rather than limiting a new technology’s functions to conform to traditional, print-dominant standards, Creative Commons licenses help creators exploit new opportunities.

“Some artists ... believe that [allowing distribution and derivative works] will support art in a certain genre and also support or extend their creative reach,” said Lessig.<sup>14</sup>

Governments interested in exploring social media simply can’t allow themselves to believe in the fallacy of control. Citizens are too savvy about social media to waste their time participating in narrow monologues when unfettered dialogue is promised or more appropriate.

Seventy-eight percent of online adults in Australia use social media regularly and the Internet is the most common way people interact with government.<sup>15</sup> Numerous local and state government agencies have leveraged their citizens’ active communities to experiment with online consultation. The future of a rail line in Newcastle, 60 miles north of Sydney, had been under debate for several years. Newcastle officials were leaning toward retaining the line when they decided to broaden the discussion using Web-based tools. In four weeks, more than 800 people signed up to debate the issue on a site dedicated to the topic. Citizens left 2,800 comments and entered more than 10,000 votes on the ideas raised by community members. An online survey drew 540 responses. A great majority of the community supported removing the rail line, data that was confirmed by 70 percent of participants of an independent telephone survey.<sup>16</sup>

By introducing a variety of tools for discussion and making no effort to control the community’s response, Newcastle officials generated high interest among their citizens and received clear instructions that altered the direction of the government’s policy.

Australia is the early global pioneer in the use of online tools to provide public policy consultation,<sup>17</sup> but the U.S. is

not without its Open Government poster children. The General Services Administration (GSA) shifted the highly trafficked information portal, USA.gov, to a cloud computing platform in May to increase the site's flexibility while slashing infrastructure costs. The move was the most visible manifestation to date of the Obama Administration's IT strategy.

"We must make sure that in public policy we eat our own proverbial dog food," said Aneesh Chopra, CTO for the federal government. "If we think it's important to spur innovation, then we must embrace the principal's innovation in our own operations."<sup>18</sup>

The traffic to USA.gov is substantial, and because the site is a hub for timely information, volume can spike dramatically depending on national events. Cloud computing solutions have the ability to shift capacity on demand so the long delays and downtime users experienced in the past can be ameliorated.

The GSA's cloud vendor addressed the agency's additional security requirements before the move. But even with the most stringent security, some feel exporting data to a location outside of the organization and allowing access through an Internet connection demands a leap of faith.

"One of the biggest security concerns about cloud computing is that when you move your information into the cloud, you lose control of it," said Eric Mandel, CEO of a managed hosting services provider. "The cloud gives you access to the data, but you have no way of ensuring no one else has access to the data."<sup>19</sup>

Open Government may have first gained traction in 2004 when the General Accounting Office changed its name to the Government Accountability Office to better reflect the agency's evolution. The GAO was created in 1921 when the Budget and Accounting Act transferred over auditing responsibilities and accounting functions from the Treasury Department. Now auditing is a minor part of the GAO's workload, crowded out by program evaluations, policy analyses and legal opinions.

"The scope of GAO's work today includes virtually everything the federal government is doing or thinking about doing anywhere in the world," said David M. Walker, comptroller general of the agency at the time.<sup>20</sup>



Chopra

The GAO now functions much like an outside consultant, advising lawmakers and agency heads on ways to make government work better. Unlike more opaque agencies, the GAO posts its reports on the Internet the same day they're issued. While some resist the influence of the Internet, the GAO has embraced it and has been transformed. The work of the GAO generated \$58.1 billion in 2008, an impressive \$114 return on every dollar invested in the agency.<sup>21</sup>

## THE GOAL OF OPEN GOVERNMENT

In one of his first actions after taking office, President Obama released the Transparency and Open Government Memo.

"My administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in government," the memo began. "We will work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration. Openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in government."<sup>22</sup>

The clarity and precision of President Obama's memo bridges any gaps between his administration's Open Government movement and the more established concept of Government 2.0. Research firm Gartner recently offered this holistic definition: "the use of information technology to socialize and commoditize government services, processes, and data." Merging President Obama's memo with the existing language of Government 2.0 provides an impressively coherent goal set for agencies looking to align their efforts with the administration's:



Obama

### What is the goal?

Establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration

### How will that goal be accomplished?

By socializing and commoditizing government services, processes, and data

### Why is that the goal?

It will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in government



## THE FALLACY OF CONTROL

An irrational need for control can be a defining characteristic for a government agency just as readily as it can for a person. Both can find frustration in a world where total control is impossible and pursuit of it destructive.

No agency will improve its transparency by limiting information (or the access to information) about their operations and the decisions they make. Successful agencies will mitigate the risks of disclosure; they will harness new technologies to release data rapidly (and with only the absolutely necessary omissions); and they will leverage feedback from citizens to identify information of the greatest use to the public.

Agencies like the General Accountability Office recognize that information maintained by the federal government is a national asset. By giving away control over information, the GAO converts citizens into partners capable of enhancing the agency's mission of alerting policymakers to emerging issues and problems.

No agency will increase public participation in its activities by broadcasting content to the public without also creating convenient and meaningful mechanisms for receiving and incorporating the content they get back. Successful agencies will build robust relationships with citizens by using dialogue, rather than non-interactive monologue.

Agencies that follow the lead of the local government in

Newcastle, Australia, recognize that public engagement enhances the government's effectiveness and improves the quality of its decisions. By giving away exclusive control over policy, agencies convert citizens into co-creators and leverage the public's collective skills and information.

No agency will increase collaboration by being secretive, bullying outsiders, and ignoring expertise from outside the agency. Successful agencies will use innovative tools, methods, and systems to cooperate among themselves, across all levels of government, and with nonprofit organizations, businesses, and citizens.

Agencies that follow the lead of U.S. CIO Vivek Kundra see the potential of collaboration to spark innovation and slash costs. As CTO for the District of Columbia, Kundra launched an Apps for Democracy contest to create applications for the Web and mobile phones. He spent \$50,000 for the contest and prize money and saved \$2.6 million in development costs.<sup>23</sup> By giving away control over development, Kundra leveraged participants' creativity and competitiveness.

Some government agencies are like the dog stuck under the pool table with an eight ball clenched in its teeth, unable to make progress without first letting go of the things they most want to control.

The transformation of the U.S. government will require talent and ingenuity within agencies, but the true secret sauce for innovation can only come from the outside.

"The performance of American government in the 21st century," suggests Satish Nambisan of the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, "Will be shaped by how well it adopts collaborative innovation to harness external resources and creativity in addressing the nation's most challenging issues."<sup>24</sup>



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## ABOUT SAPIENT GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Sapient helps government agencies and commercial companies transform in the areas of business, technology and marketing to drive long-term change and evolve the citizen experience. Sapient Government Services is a leader in helping government agencies become more accessible and transparent through the use of technology -- our teams bring a track record of delivering mission-critical solutions, the ability to leverage commercial best practices and unique insights as part of the only leading interactive agency with a dedicated federal practice.

Our ability to foster collaboration, provide rapid results and solve challenging problems has enabled us to serve as trusted advisors and build long-term partnerships with government agencies including the Department of Homeland Security, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Institutes of Health, United States Department of Health and Human Services, and the Library of Congress. For more information, please visit: [www.sapient.com/government](http://www.sapient.com/government).

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Dan Willis is a user experience consultant for Sapient Government Services where his clients have included the Department of Homeland Security, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

Willis presents regularly at both private and public sector conferences. In 2009, he participated in panels for the Open Government and Innovation conference and the Web 3.0 conference. He presented at this year's South by Southwest Interactive Festival, the Interaction Design Association's annual conference, and the Information Architecture Summit. He regularly posts articles on user experience and product development issues at <http://www.uxcrank.com>.

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