

ANZSOG Research Project 2013

The implications of government as a “social machine” for making and implementing market-based policy

Project Overview

The World Wide Web has been described as the largest "information construct" ever created by humanity. It has provided unprecedented access to information for anyone with a computer connected to the internet and, whilst still in its infancy, has already had an impact on many aspects of the processes of government.

As a socio-technical phenomenon the Web is dissolving the boundaries between the human as a “user” and the machine as a “tool”. This is because on the Web the human and machine are inextricably linked, each reliant on the activities of the other. As machines become more adept at “learning” about the human from the data received, they become more effective at responding to queries, performing tasks and contextualising information. We are witnessing this with social media where humans can connect on the scale and within the timeframes now possible only with the mediation of a machine, and that machine would be of little value without this human interaction. This human-technology system is now being called a “social machine”.

Real life is and must be full of all kinds of social constraint – the very processes from which society arises. Computers can help if we use them to create abstract social machines on the Web: processes in which the people do the creative work and the machine does the administration... The stage is set for an evolutionary growth of new social engines."
(Tim Berners-Lee, *Weaving the Web*, 1999)

This phenomenon is being driven by information and communications, the life-blood of the knowledge economy. Whereas in previous eras Governments sought to "market" their programmes to citizens through advertising, now they must engage in a dialogue based on multi-directional interactions often facilitated by machines. In many cases entrepreneurs and citizens are taking the initiative themselves and creating new applications in response to market needs, and thus the role of Government is changing from to being a provider to a facilitator.

Project Objectives

This project seeks to more fully understand how Governments around the world are using "The Web", and in particular Web 2.0. “Web 2.0” technologies enable “read/write” interactions between and among users, and the promise is that by engaging with citizens via these mechanisms Government agencies can more fully understand stakeholder needs, and increase productivity and reduce waste by more effectively and efficiently delivering targeted Government services.

This project explores the concept of twenty-first century government as a “social machine” in its own right, with a focus on analysing the links between the rapid development of information and communications technologies and the accompanying organisational changes. This crucial transition in thinking acknowledges the disruptive and dynamic context within which Government operates, whilst simultaneously recognising the challenges that Governments of all kinds face as they attempt to utilise and exploit digital technologies for better governance.

A key objective will be to more fully understand what skills and capabilities government manager require in order to cope in this environment.

Project Benefits

For the past three years the teaching of the “Managing Public Communications” (MOC) programme has gradually been incorporating aspects of digital interaction technologies, including Web 2.0 and social media, into the content. This is both as a proactive recognition of the rapidly changing information and communications landscape within which Public Sector professionals operate, as well as a direct response to requests from the participants themselves. This project seeks to bring together some of the latest research to inform the MPC programme as it continues to evolve. In addition, it is hoped that this project will inform ongoing research in the ICT space within ANZSOG, whilst simultaneously connecting the School with other research and educational institutions internationally. Numerous institutions are integrating Social Media into their courses either as part of Marketing programmes or as the next step in “eGovernment”, but the proposed approach is new in that it treats Government itself as a “Social Machine”. This links in with other international research and teaching programmes in the UK and Europe in the field of “Web Science” (www.webscience.org) as well as government initiatives in the UK (www.gov.uk). This project would enable ANZSOG to begin to reframe its own offerings within the digital environment.

Methodology

The key questions driving this research will draw on other research currently under way, in particular the £6m SOCIAM Project currently under way in the UK.

It will ask three key questions:

- How does Government as a "social machine" change the way that it interacts with citizens?
- What key challenges are emerging as a result of this perspective?
- How are Government agencies addressing these challenges?

Phase One will be desk-based research with a view to identifying subjects for potential case studies based on Government initiatives which link the use of technologies aimed to achieve specific social outcomes. These will include:

1. technology embodied by the social machine as a tool for democracy;
2. technology embodied by the social machine as a tool for communication; and
3. technology embodied by the social machine as a tool for customer satisfaction.

We will also link each of these with the three key drivers of government reform being transformation, effectiveness and efficiency.

Phase Two will develop the knowledge gained through Phase One and look to developing a Web based pilot/prototype “social machine” which will be utilized as part of the teaching of the 2013 "Managing Public Communications" Executive Workshop and other relevant programmes.

Researcher Team

Professor Michael Vitale is the Director at the Monash Asia Pacific Centre for Science and Wealth Creation and focuses his teaching, research, and consulting on commercialisation of innovation. Previously Michael had a joint professorial appointment at the Melbourne Business School and the Australia New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG). At MBS, he was the director of the innovation research program. Michael’s expertise in the Management of Information Technologies is crucial in terms of this research particularly in understanding how new Web based services are being developed through innovative approaches to development and commercialisation.

(<http://www.monash.edu.au/research/swc/about/people.html>)

Anni Rowland-Campbell is Director of Intersticia (www.intersticia.com), a research consultancy which provides strategic advice to organisations as they learn to actively engage with “new media”. Anni is a former NSW State Ministerial Advisor, was formerly Executive Director of the NSW of the Institute of Public Administration (IPAA), and has served on numerous State and Federal Government Boards and Committees. Anni is currently undertaking a PhD through the Deakin Graduate School of Business focusing on the emerging Web and systems of governance. From 2006 – 2012 Ann led two ARC funded research projects into the impact of emerging Web technologies on information and communication (www.circlesofsustainability.org). Anni is a Member of the Board of Web Science Australia (www.webscienceaustralia.org). Anni’s expertise is crucial in understanding how individuals and organisations are using the Web to engage with stakeholders, together with framing this into a research context. In addition her network of contacts within government is vital in garnering public sector support.

Dr Valentina Cardo is a Lecturer in the Department of Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland. Her particular focus is on how politics (political ideas, values, ideologies, policy) is communicated through popular channels and the democratic consequences of such communication. She is currently working on a project which investigates the links between women's activism and the new media. Valentina’s expertise in how lobby groups utilise new media technologies will be leveraged in order to more fully understand how governments can engage these groups to both provide better services. She will also engage directly with the New Zealand government as part of the investigations into the response to the Christchurch earthquake.

(<http://www.artsfaculty.auckland.ac.nz/staff/?UPI=vcar206>)

Peter Thompson is a Fellow of the Australia and New Zealand School of Government where he teaches executive programs in communication strategy and adaptive change, risk and crisis communication and behavioural change. Peter is also an Adjunct Professor at Macquarie University’s Department of International Communication, and directs the Centre for Leadership which works with the public, private and not-for-profit sectors on communication strategy and practice. Peter’s role in the research will be to ensure that there is a direct link between the research design and findings, and application into ANZSOG Managing Public Communications Executive Workshop.

(<http://centreforleadership.com/about/who-are-we/>)