



The Connected Republic and the Power of Social Networks

Authors

Anne Lange
Shane Mitchell
Martin Stewart-Weeks
James Vila

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The Answer Is Social Networks— What Was the Question?

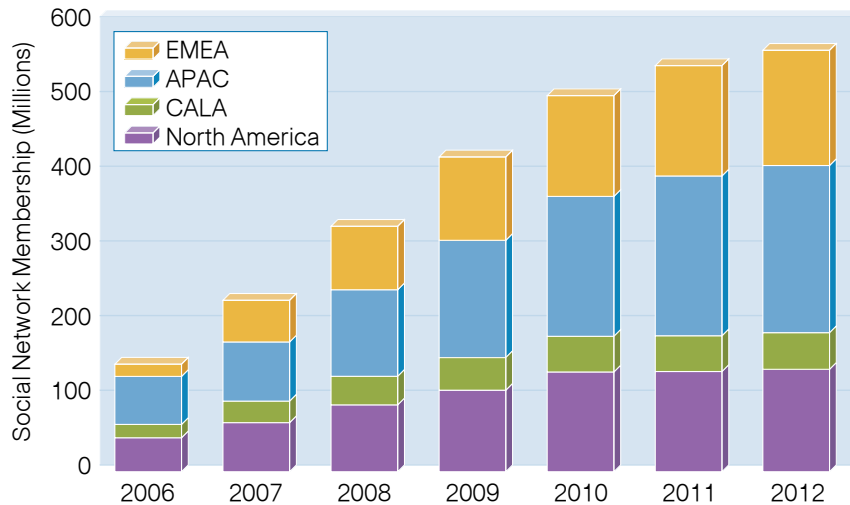
The headlong rush toward online social networking experimentation is so pervasive that it is hardly surprising that governments and public sector bodies are getting in on the act.

So how does the phenomenon of social networking affect government? Why should the ability of a single user to share a video of a skateboarding dog with a global audience of more than 100 million cause governments fundamentally to rethink not only how they interact with citizens, but what they actually do?

The question, of course, is whether this flurry of activity signifies anything more than a hot trend, cast aside like a child's toy when it is no longer shiny and new, or does it signal a sea change in the dynamics of the relationship between public bodies and their stakeholders, particularly citizens and employees.

In this paper, we look at the increasing role that technology-enabled social networks are playing in three areas: government as enterprise, government as service provider, and government as policymaker.

Figure 1. Social Networking Growth Is a Global Trend



Source: Datamonitor, Ipsos MORI, 2007

Back to the Future: Social Networking Defined

Let us begin by destroying a myth. There is absolutely nothing new about the concept of social networks. This becomes clear if you read the definition provided by Wikipedia:

“A social network is a social structure made of nodes (which are generally individuals or organizations) that are tied by one or more specific types of interdependency, such as values, visions, ideas, financial exchange, friends, kinship, dislike, conflict, trade, web links, sexual relations, disease transmission (epidemiology), or airline routes....Research in a number of academic fields has shown that social networks operate on many levels, from families up to the level of nations, and play a critical role in determining the way problems are solved, organizations are run, and the degree to which individuals succeed in achieving their goals.”¹

So social networks are as old as human interactions and have played significant roles in shaping human history for thousands of years. Schools, universities, the military, masons, churches, and professional associations are all examples of social networks.

What has elevated the topic of social networks to such prominence in the councils of the elite in all avenues of life—including government, politics, business, education, and entertainment?

In brief, Web 2.0 happened. British actor and author Stephen Fry, who writes a column on technology in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, describes Web 2.0 as “...an idea in people’s heads rather than a reality. It’s actually an idea that the reciprocity between the user and the provider is what’s emphasized. In other words, genuine interactivity...because people can upload as well as download.” The fact that an estimated 90 percent

of participants are passive “lurkers” rather than activists does not negate the power of the 10 percent who are active social networkers—nor does it prevent lurkers from becoming activists when it suits them.

The defining characteristics of social networking are the two words that make up the term; social networks are, by definition, “social” tools, designed to create connections and communities, and they are “networks” whose radical potential lies in their proven ability to cut across the traditionally show-stopping barriers of distance, interest, social class, geopolitics, and so forth.

This reciprocity has been enabled by a second generation of Web-based tools and services that permit vastly improved collaboration and richer interactions among users. These tools include chat and instant messaging from providers such as Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo!; video and photo sharing on sites such as YouTube and FlickrR; and file sharing and blogging on sites such as Facebook and MySpace.

Such tools dramatically boost the speed and scope of transmission of increasingly rich content around the network of users. It is this scope, speed, and richness of exchange, coupled with the ease of publication, that has transformed the power of social networks.

Social Networks Transformed by Web 2.0 Technologies

Prior to the advent of Web 2.0 technology, social networks were limited by the physical proximity of the nodes on the network. Although that limitation has disappeared, there are other limits to the scope of social networks. Facebook and MySpace do not help create more genuinely close friends. (The physical usually trumps the virtual.) The maximum number of friends with whom one person

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_networks

can maintain relationships is estimated at around 150² people in the physical world.

By decreasing the cost and effort of entry and maintenance, social networks allow involvement in multiple interactive networks. Social networks are a remarkably efficient means of initiating and maintaining hundreds, or even thousands, of acquaintances, simultaneously and with little effort. For example, in the past, a group of doctors could talk to each other on the phone; they could meet each other infrequently at conferences; they could publish in journals that had to be physically sent to other members of the network; and they could comment on the content within those paper-based journals by mailing letters to the editor or to each other. Today, doctors can have instant access to many thousands of other physicians, anywhere in the world.

Social networks also form around communities of people with special interests—people who otherwise might never encounter others with similar passions. This allows even tiny minorities to network, to pool information and resources, and even to mobilize around deeply felt causes.

Web 2.0-enabled social networks have transformed speed and reach. They provide the instantaneous ability to create, publish, and transmit content to large numbers of people, unconstrained by physical boundaries. They enable readers to add comments immediately, and to develop synchronous and asynchronous “conversations” that can be exposed to the total universe or a subset of the network—completely within the user’s control.

For good or ill, these tools have unleashed a flood of content, ideas, creativity, and interactions into the world. The objection that most social network-generated content is unmediated, however, is simply not true. Content is filtered

by the community that co-creates it, rather than by the traditional elite guardians of editorial standards—professional journalists, producers, and writers. The network itself—the community—does the mediating, which in itself becomes a social process.

So social networking does more than accelerate the reach of interactions. Because these tools potentiate social interaction, they change the quality and impact of the social process.

Quality Versus Quantity

Clearly, the volume of user-generated content and the community nature of the editing process do not necessarily mean better content. Here, beauty is definitely in the eye of the beholder.

Some see social networks’ lack of traditional editorial quality control as a powerful argument against their contribution to human discourse. As David Weinberger³ has pointed out, in the end, the big story of Web 2.0 is that it is all about abundance—there’s just a lot more of everything, good, bad, and horribly indifferent.

Social Networks Take Hold in the Millennial Generation

Web 2.0-powered social networks really began to take root in younger audiences, particularly Generation X and Y (those born after 1980), in the social, entertainment, and personal domains.

The most notable examples are MySpace and Facebook, which now have more than 166 million members⁴ between them globally. These two sites have generally been used by members to connect individuals, who may previously have been completely unaware of each other’s existence, through a common interest in subjects such as bands, books, gaming, dating, and so forth.

2. “Social Networking Sites Don’t Deepen Friendships,” James Randerson, Guardian Unlimited, September 10, 2007.

3. *The Wall Street Journal Online*, July 18, 2007, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB118460229729267677.html>

4. comScore, 2007

As the bar chart below demonstrates, social networking sites are now an intrinsic part of the experience of youth, as deeply embedded in their culture as music and gaming.

This trend toward the use of social networking sites is also gradually spreading into older age groups, as the table in Figure 3 indicates.

These sites are constantly evolving. Many social networking sites that started with an almost entirely social and entertainment dynamic have spawned numerous specialist networks. Professional communities are capturing the opportunity to share information and mediate opinion-forming discussion. On MySpace, for example, a number of museums, such as the Tate in the United Kingdom and the American Museum of Natural History, have a presence. Ironically, traditional media is further tapping into social networks. The *Financial Times* in 2008 is launching a subscription-based platform

for professional communities, while Scoop08.com is an example of the citizen journalism trend that is forcing traditional players down this path.

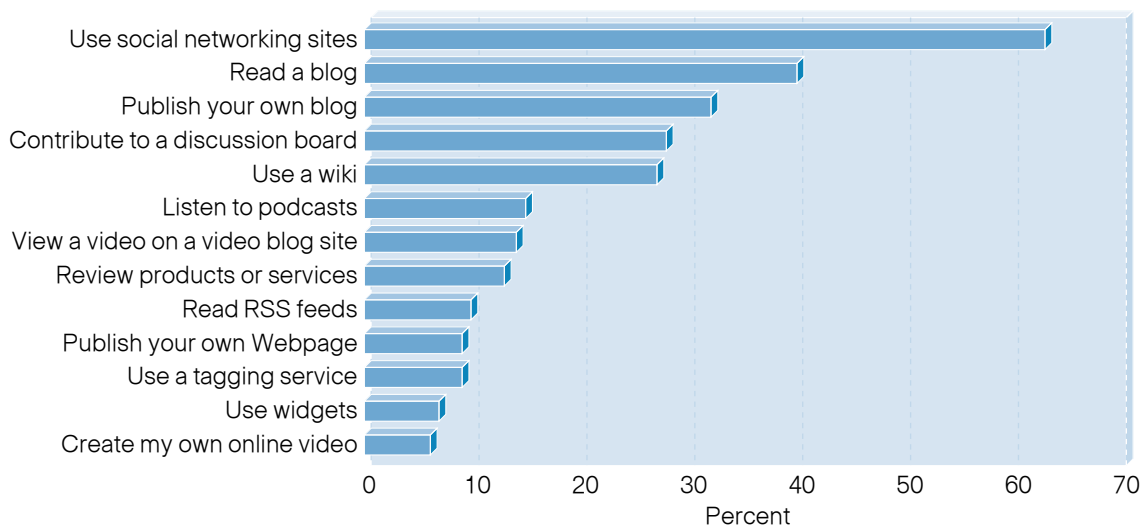
How Social Networks Empower the People

To explain this phenomenon, it is worth spending a little time asking what social networks enable us to do, and how they are being used.

The benefits can be classified into three broad categories:

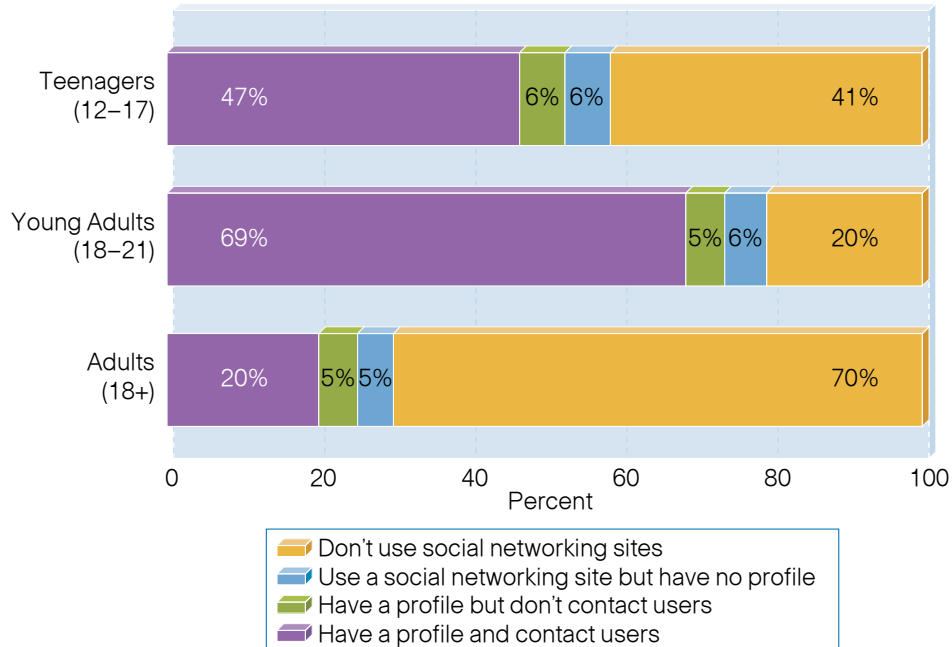
Community: the use of social networking tools and capabilities to interact with people who share your interests and passions—affinity networks, friendship groups, discussion groups—about issues that might attract considerable divergence of opinions, but center on a core shared interest, such as politics, rock music, or mountain climbing.

Figure 2. Online Activities of Youth (12- to 21-year-old U.S. Consumers)



Source: Forrester Research, 2007

Figure 3. Social Network Usage across U.S. Online Consumers



Source: Forrester Research, 2007

Collaboration: the use of social networking tools and capabilities to connect people, expertise, and resources in search of solutions that can't be created with any one of those ingredients alone. This could be as simple as a technical self-help community working together to solve problems, or information about where to find the cheapest car or best hotel.

Contribution: the use of social networking tools and capabilities to make it easier for customers or citizens to contribute their ideas, expertise, concerns, and preferences in the process of designing new products, services, or policies. Examples include blogs on everything from politics to dog breeding, or the contribution of tangible solutions to the community in the form of services such as open source software development.

Why Does It Work So Well?

Compared to most technology adoption curves, social networks have taken off with astonishing speed. Probably the greatest driver has been the *simplicity of the interfaces*. It is surely easier to write and publish a blog than to save an address to the memory of most mobile phones, or even to record TV programs on a DVR.

Second, the amazing access and reach of social networks allow them to work well. The power of mass media has traditionally been access to the masses. Social networking allows anyone, anywhere in the world (anywhere there is a reasonably fast Internet connection), to publish to greater numbers of users every day. For example, one of the most popular YouTube videos, *Evolution of Dance*,⁵ has been viewed more than 76 million times.

5. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMH0bHeiRNq>

In government, the impact of those three core social networking benefits—community, collaboration, and contribution—is already being felt in three areas of the public sector:

- Improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government as an enterprise (or a collection of enterprises)
- Improving the design, reach, and impact of public services
- Improving the quality and impact of policymaking

Government as Enterprise

Government, like any enterprise or organization, should respond to the potential offered by social networks to collaborate, comment, and share with its stakeholders (customers, employees, partners, media) in a completely new way. This could include the analysis or observation of social networks that address subject areas of interest to government, or that fall within government's scope of responsibility.

Social Networks Oil the Wheels of Internal Collaboration

Internal and external stakeholders can collaborate, share, and research with greater speed of reach, richness, and transparency of interactions than ever before. This provides government with a tremendous opportunity to use social networking tools to foster much richer collaboration in its daily operations. Social networking tools also have the potential to speed up government, improve productivity, and break down silos and barriers between functional departments.

The social networking trend appears to be irreversible and presents huge challenges to inherited traditions of hierarchical, command-and-control approaches of “doing” government. There is a possibility that government will miss the transition and risk further alienation from its citizens.

This is particularly true as Generations X and Y become the core employee base within government. This group was raised on the Web and uses social networking tools as a matter of course.

U.K. Mental Health Trust Reaches Local Communities through Facebook

In the United Kingdom, the South West Yorkshire Mental Health Trust has set up a presence on Facebook, the leading social networking site. The local Health Trust, in applying for Foundation Trust status, requires members of the local community to join the Trust. Social networking presents an opportunity to tap into the local community by presenting an open approach to public interactions. Chief Executive Steven Michael explains that, “As we apply to become a Foundation Trust, we want to give local people as many ways as possible to get involved....It is especially important that we try different methods of reaching out to young people in ways that are familiar to them.”

The Facebook presence enables discussions on topics of relevance, interactions on subjects that some feel uneasy discussing in a face-to-face setting, as well as sharing of information. Of course, the scope of this approach in a stigmatized area such as mental health raises issues regarding the level of openness required, public disclosure, and presenting a platform where citizens feel able to contribute freely. Nevertheless, this project takes the existing “**NHS Choices**” community discussion into an open and less controlled environment.⁶

6. <http://www.southwestyorkshirenhs.nhs.uk>

Social networking in government presents a number of challenges. Government must accept that upcoming generations will use these tools with or without formal enabling structures. The risks are that government practices and processes will not adapt, causing the best and brightest employees and other stakeholders to be less attracted to the public sector working environment, or that competing informal structures will rise to prominence as these groups “do it themselves.” This might cause a two-pronged system to emerge: one led by “early adopters” using new tools and techniques for collaboration, and the other by “laggards” resisting change and sticking with tried-and-tested processes for getting things done.

Further exacerbating the situation, social networks also provide a potential channel for

peers to express frustrations and challenges, and to identify opportunities with each other, outside traditional structures and processes.

The natural impulse in such an open environment may impel government toward control and constraint rather than facilitation and enablement. It is also possible, however, that a new public sector management culture could emerge, prioritizing individual responsibility over hierarchy. As with any major point of inflection, the transformation could bring wrenching changes to the operational DNA of the public sector. There may emerge a culture clash between younger, Web-savvy employees and the generation that grew up in an environment without these tools, or between early adopters and the laggards. Success will require training, education, and management drive.

Experimental Citizen Participation Initiatives

The Digital Dialogues program in the United Kingdom, commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and carried out by the **Hansard Society**, explores how citizens can contribute to the development of new policies, and offers new platforms for government officials to communicate on key issues.

One example from the change in approach by the U.K. government is the **www.petitions.pm.gov.uk** online forum from the Prime Minister’s Website. This has enabled citizens to register their opinions and campaign on specific initiatives. Notably, a campaign driven through this forum on road pricing in 2007 forced a review of government plans in this area.

Intellipedia and A-Space: Knowledge Sharing for the U.S. Intelligence Community

In the United States, 16 key security agencies have created “Intellipedia,” a wiki-style application encouraging informal cooperation on world crisis and foreign affairs hot topics. About two-thirds of analysts across various agencies have used the application to compile their reports.

In addition, “A-Space,” a U.S. intelligence community platform modeled on Facebook and MySpace, further enables interaction and networking across this broad community.

Government as Service Provider

Online social networking tools and platforms enable citizens not only to communicate, but also to create an enabling collaboration platform for the delivery of real-world public services. There is evidence that some individuals are already collaborating to design, develop, and deliver

services that would normally be provided by the public sector without government intervention or sponsorship. Web 2.0 technology allows a great deal of scope for pulling in new types of players, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as allowing government to design the ways in which it delivers services to citizens.

Citizen Activism

Openstreetmap.org (OSM) is a community geo-mapping initiative that embraces the pure open source philosophy that underlies the participative Web. This initiative is a good example of how a community of amateur enthusiasts can provide a service that competes with commercial and public information sources. In the case of OSM, the restrictive intellectual property rights regime of the Ordnance Survey (the government mapping agency in the United Kingdom), and the desire of users for easily accessible, non-commercial mapping data, instigated this project in 2004.

The scale of OSM's success is breathtaking. To date, OSM is enabling community mapping projects in 79 countries worldwide. OSM achieved this by tapping into the needs of local communities and providing a platform for participation and creation in a fun, rapid, and easy manner.

The community itself is cultivated through the simple and quick wiki interface, but also by the sense of community created by participants. Citizens can get on their bikes with a global positioning system and map their local community. This local community participation is also encouraged by a series of local "mapping parties," adding face-to-face interactions to the social experience.

Japanese Open Community Website

In Yatsushiro, Japan, a novel approach to public information provision has gained impressive levels of community participation.

In response to declining citizen participation in the "Gorotto Yatchiro" e-government initiative, a member of the Yatsushiro IT department decided to design and program a new version of Gorotto in 2004 to address "trust" concerns found in Japanese culture regarding government interactions. The creator, Takao Kobayashi, mentions four points⁷ that motivated him to create the "Open Gorotto" platform:

- Citizens are much better at sharing government information, so each citizen's network serves as a multiplier.
- The platform helps the community grow stronger, meaning that people who share mutual interests can get together in a pleasant atmosphere.
- The platform presents general and government information in a different way.
- Administrators should interact with and learn from citizens.

7. http://www.iq.harvard.edu/blog/netgov/2006/12/government_social_software_sns.html

The Social Network Software (SNS) platform links directly to Yatsushiro's website. "Gorotto Yatchiro" includes various personalization features, discussion forums, a blog, and multimedia applications. The open architecture of the platform and the mashup of various information sources provide a more accessible format for users and allow the integration of other applications and features. In addition, Kobayashi believes that the community-created platform overcomes citizen objections to government-driven initiatives.

Governments can choose to stand on the sidelines and merely observe these changes, or become drivers of change, incentivizing the participation of the next generation of citizens, born and raised in the Web 2.0 culture.

The delivery mechanics of traditional government information and services might also change, with citizens doing more and governments doing less. This is likely to require a fundamental reorganization of government and public service structures, based on a model that is more "distributed" and less top-down. Social networking culture, however, remains relatively pure and is not well-matched to the traditionally segmented structure of government at national, regional, and local levels.

The good news is that if the process of service delivery changes, effectiveness might be enhanced through more targeted delivery based on greater insight into citizen needs.

Participation undoubtedly enhances the image of government on chosen subjects due to the more dynamic and modern format of the information itself. When they are properly administered and targeted, social networks can make public communication more agile (rapidly adjusting and refocusing communications), more accurate (reaching the right community at the right time), and more cost effective (smaller, more-focused messages).

Of course, such engagement also means that governments will face new challenges: harnessing the creativity and enthusiasm of citizens while ensuring that funding models are managed and that universal service provision is maintained.

In examining the question of whether governments should explore social networking tools as a means of delivering services and information, two basic issues remain, regardless of the tools or technology: Does social networking encourage greater quality of service? And, does it promote greater efficiencies?

If the answer to these questions is "Yes," then deployment of social networking tools to deliver services should be considered.

Government as Policymaker

Social networking services and tools afford citizens the opportunity to publish and transmit opinions and ideas on policy in a much more transparent and accelerated manner. Traditionally, policy development is conducted in a rather formal manner with specific gates through the process: white papers, green papers, and so forth. Public consultation is conducted through relatively sparsely attended public meetings and road shows, largely attracting only highly committed or vested interests.

Servicing Local Communities

In the United Kingdom, the local community Website **FixMyStreet.com** invites citizen of a given district to report, view, or discuss local problems. For instance, citizens can report graffiti, broken paving slabs, or street lighting problems. The person who registered a complaint receives a message back when the problem has been fixed. The use of interactive maps and satellite photos makes the system work for both neighbors and local authorities. This initiative was created by **mySociety.org**, a U.K.-based charity initiative that drives citizen democracy and participation.

Community Building at the Regional Level

Communitybuilders.nsw.au is a social networking initiative by the New South Wales (NSW) government in Australia. The ability of communities of interest to develop online interactions has proven an innovative and successful approach to government engagement with the wider community. The initiative has been in place since 1999, prior to the current boom in social networking.

The New South Wales government developed the social network in response to the desire expressed by communities to access information about what others are doing and what works to make their community safer, healthier, inclusive, and more vibrant and enterprising.

The program describes itself as an interactive clearinghouse where users publish their stories and tips on the site. Users encompass everyone involved or interested in making NSW communities more dynamic, healthy, and successful, including community members of all ages, different community organizations, community workers, and all levels of government and business.

Social networking services have the potential to increase significantly the scope and reach of citizen participation.

To adapt to and influence the new dynamics of debate, policy development processes must be more transparent, presenting clear timeframes, anticipated outputs, and success measurement. This involves a change in public culture, further pushing it down the track of accountability based on being “results and process oriented.”

There is also a risk in empowering online democracy; despite the technology’s potential for democratization, it is possible that the same

groups that dominate conventional public debate will also dominate online debate. Governments must work hard to maintain appropriate links between citizens and political leaders, and avoid ceding power to a small, vocal, and proactive minority who are adept at exploiting the new tools.

To do so, they must consider complementary policies that facilitate individual access to devices with connectivity and that encourage public and private investment in fast Internet access for all segments of society. At the end of the day, home-based Internet access is critical to fostering appropriate use and behavior on the Internet.

New Zealand Police and Wiki Policy

In New Zealand, the Police Authority set up a wiki⁸ to canvass inputs from citizens regarding a new Police Act, to be enacted in the constitution in 2008. Citizens were able to register and submit their proposals for the Act's themes, emphasis, and how it should be worded.

Running throughout September 2007, the wiki served as a complement to traditional public consultations and lobbying. By opening up the discussion online in such a collaborative way, the Police Authority captured a broader range of public perspectives. The result was that a number of articles in the existing Police Act were included in a forthcoming bill to the New Zealand Parliament.

This innovative, participative approach represents a mind shift for many public agencies, but has the potential to revolutionize trust and engagement in public sector entities.

City Collaborates with Citizens in Second Life

The Dutch city of Zoetermeer is using a virtual world to transform its civil services.⁹ The city government collaborates with citizens, using direct online communication to jointly develop well-constructed policies.

Using this Second Life virtual world, the city hall is providing an innovative way of interacting to promote the development of well-supported government policy, particularly aimed at appealing to younger citizens. Currently, Zoetermeer is operating a pilot project within Second Life to shed light on its experiences, the lessons learned, and the future possibilities of using virtual worlds for citizen/government collaboration.

A Foregone Conclusion

As we have demonstrated in this paper, the use of social networks in the public sphere is already happening and is gathering speed. As new generations of both public sector employees and citizens become involved, it is reasonable to conclude that the use of social networks will become routine for all three of the government activities highlighted in the paper: government as enterprise, government as service provider, and government as policymaker. As we have seen, the dynamics of these tools open up the

process of creation and development in a powerful way, offering the opportunity for much greater engagement, participation, and transparency for all the stakeholders involved in government. It is also clear that such a transformation will require careful thought and planning, and that this process will need to be informed by principles of inclusiveness. Top-down social networking solutions will not work.

As a final coda to the discussion, social networks are impacting even public sectors not known for their openness and transparency. Social net-

8. <http://wiki.policeact.govt.nz/>

9. <http://www.platformvirtuelewerelden.nl>

working environments are beginning to feature officials of the Chinese government; a Facebook page dedicated to Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao has been set up. According to a recent article in *The New York Times* (Edward Wong, May 28, 2008), “It reflects the booming popularity of Mr. Wen, also known as “Grandpa Wen,” who flew to Sichuan Province hours after the May 12 earthquake there and traveled through the hardest-hit towns, expressing sympathy to victims all the way. He became the face of China’s grief.” Whether the page was set up by overseas fans, or the government itself, the very fact that Chinese government officials are showcased on Facebook is an intriguing indicator that social networks are playing a growing role in the practice of government.

The question for public policymakers around the world is whether they will facilitate, lead, and shape these changes and take full advantage of the new tools—or merely follow the pack. The prize is a grand one. Social networks have the potential to become the catalyst for the “Connected Republic”^{*}—truly participatory democracy on a grand scale.

For more information about the use of social networking by governments, please contact:

Anne Lange, Director
Public Sector Practice
Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group
+33 (15) 804 3095 (Phone)
+33 6 19 98 45 05 (Mobile)
alange@cisco.com

James Vila, Director
Customer Experience Practice
Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group
+1 408 527 7481 (Phone)
+1 630 639 7516 (Mobile)
jamvila@cisco.com

^{*} The “Connected Republic” refers to the potential of networked technologies to drive public sector reform and new ways of governing. You can learn more by downloading Cisco IBSG’s Connected Republic white paper from <http://www.theconnectedrepublic.org>, an online forum that includes input from public sector leaders and practitioners from around the world.

Notes

More Information

The Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG), the global strategic consulting arm of Cisco, helps CXOs and public sector leaders transform their organizations—first by designing innovative business processes, and then by integrating advanced technologies into visionary roadmaps that address key CXO concerns.

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