

1. Introduction: An Information Age Democracy?

Over the past 20 years, advances in information technology have had a significant impact on most societies. The scale of these impacts have been most profound in the developed world and have dramatically changed the way business is done in countries like Australia and New Zealand, which have something of a reputation as 'early adopters' of new technologies.

The ubiquity of communication and information technologies has significant implications for the ways in which the public sector conducts its business. The adoption of new technologies allows improvements in the delivery of public services, as well as the manner in which the work of the public sector is structured and undertaken.

Most governments in New Zealand and Australia have been active in developing new approaches to the delivery of public services using technologies like the internet and telephony. One area of growing public sector activity is the use of these technologies to improve communication with key stakeholder groups in order to engage them in public management decisions that affect their lives. The adoption of new technologies is, in part, a function of increasing accessibility and affordability. It also reflects a growing recognition of the *dynamic* and *interactive* potential of these technologies and their capacity to engage the public.

The adoption of new technologies is manifest in many ways, including:

- the substitution of old methods of communication with new ones;
- the development of new channels of communication with existing stakeholders;
- the ability to access new stakeholder groups and draw them into the policy development and implementation process;
- active participation in decision-making by the community; and
- new forms of policy administration and implementation using collaborative technologies.

Given the possibilities that new communications and computing technologies provide to public sector managers, this manual aims to introduce and discuss the concept of 'electronic engagement' (eEngagement), namely, the use of new technologies in a range of consultative and deliberative processes which enhance public participation in shaping policy outcomes.

1.1. Who is this Guide For?

This guide has been written for the public sector manager who has an interest in the ways in which information and communication technologies may be used

to *democratise* decision-making and policy implementation. It is specifically written for *policy* professionals (rather than *information technology* professionals) who have a modest understanding of modern information technology.

Four types of public sector manager might want to use this guide:

- the manager facing a 'challenge' and possibly looking for alternative ideas or approaches to new or existing problems (including those specifically concerned with the challenges of consultation such as poor outcomes obtained in previous engagement processes);
- the manager with experience in online community engagement, which may have delivered sub-optimal outcomes and who is looking to review and refocus their efforts;
- managers with carriage of consultative processes looking to add new techniques to their repertoire; or
- public sector managers concerned with the effective implementation and evaluation of initiatives in the area of electronic democracy.

Unfortunately, this guide cannot provide one single implementation path for eEngagement, because:

- the range of activities that can fall under this category is extremely broad. Although some specific models have had significant attention to date, many other online engagement approaches are still at a formative and *experimental* stage of development;
- the speed of technological change is outstripping the capacity of policy researchers to theorise its application. It may be *years* before the full implications of the introduction of new media are realised; and
- the mix of *issue*, *methodology*, *audience* and *technology* often makes each implementation unique. Often 'tried and true' models translate poorly into different environments for a range of reasons, including cultural differences, excessive expectations and different institutional approaches to policy development.

Despite the virtual explosion of technological innovation eEngagement is not a mature field. Understanding the range of possibilities for these technologies will require the sharing of experiences, coupled with ongoing experimentation, evaluation and documentation. This is currently being undertaken by practitioners using online tools to share experiences and information and through institutional responses by governments setting up practice areas.

1.2. The Challenges of Engagement

The public sector is a set of institutions continually subject to reform pressures and new challenges. While the classic bureaucratic model of public administration stressed standardisation, rule-based management and stability, wider pressures on the public sector over the last 50 years have encouraged increased flexibility in program implementation and *inclusiveness* in program design.¹

These changes tend to be driven by concerns about effectiveness and significant constraints on the resources made available to public sector managers. Throughout the public sector, it is increasingly recognised that the achievement of successful program outcomes requires:

- the incorporation of local actors and stakeholders in public programs;
- co-ordination of activities across organisations, jurisdictions and between public and private sectors; and
- the development and implementation of policy based on strong evidentiary justifications.

At the same time, however, public confidence in the role and ability, of government has been declining over recent years (see Exhibit 1). The public continues to have high expectations of the services provided by the public sector, but is increasingly sceptical of government's abilities and cynical regarding the motivations of political leaders.² This level of disengagement makes devolution difficult and undermines the recognition of positive public programs.

Exhibit 1: Declining Trust in Government — New Zealand and Australia

... in 1985, 8.6% of New Zealanders had 'a great deal' of confidence in the government. By 1998 that figure had fallen to 2.5%. The number of people who were 'not at all' confident in the good intentions of their government doubled from 11.1% in 1985 to 21.8% in 1998.

Barnes and Gill, 2000, *Declining Government Performance?*

Why Citizens Don't Trust Government

... many public institutions lost public confidence in the period 1983-95, including the legal system 61% to 35%, the press 29% to 16%, the public service 47% to 38% and the Federal government 55% to 26%.

Cox, 2003, *Social In/Equality*

¹ Thomas, John, 1995, *Public Participation in Public Decisions: New Skills and Strategies for Public Managers*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco.

² Žižek, Slavoj, 1989, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London.

1.2.1. An Expanding Policy Role for Public Sector Managers

Public scepticism about the role of the state has contributed to the emergence of managerial norms that emphasise inclusive and devolved policy development. In turn, this has required public sector managers to acquire new skills and capabilities.

While the classic bureaucratic model emphasised and rewarded strict technical expertise, the modern public sector manager is expected to have a range of 'soft' skills around coalition formation and stakeholder management. Some of the representative functions (consultation, negotiation, coalition building and other political skills) once attributed to political leaders have been delegated (appropriately or not) to public sector managers.

This approach is both consistent and broadly aligned with an emphasis on notions of *public value* in public sector management. Mark Moore, in his 1995 book *Creating Public Value* (see Exhibit 2), remarks on what he sees as a trend towards executive government expecting public sector managers to be *responsive* to the public's interests and concerns. Needless to say, this creates new responsibilities and accountabilities for managers.

Exhibit 2: Engagement as the Creation of Public Value

In his 1995 Book, *Creating Public Value*, Mark Moore outlines the role of the public manager as an agent in creating 'value' in the public sector, in the same way that a private-sector manager is tasked with creating private (or 'shareholder') value. Public managers, according to Moore, need to focus their attention on a bridging role between political leaders (who are 'authorisers' of manager's plans) and stakeholder groups.

Thus, as in the private sector, alignment needs to be made between the satisfaction of those who consume the public services being provided (customers and clients) and those to whom the manager is directly responsible (political leadership as a 'board of directors'). This requires that public managers recognise themselves as having an important role in 'strengthening the policies that are sold to their authorisers'. Moore, therefore, observes that the public manager is critical in shaping the public 'narrative' around their programs of action.

While this can simply be seen as call for better program development in the public sector, Moore's notion of public managers as value creators is broader: First, he recognises that the analogy between public and private value creation is somewhat false and that public value creation is not the result of a free choice by clients, but suffers from coercion (either at the individual level of program consumption, or collectively

through taxation). The public manager is constrained in their ability to rely on 'marketplace' models of accountability.

Secondly, Moore is very critical of 'defects' in the political system as a guide to action for public managers. Citing 'corrupting' elements like short-termism, irrational decision-making and risk avoidance, Moore identifies a basic problem in classical conceptions of bureaucratic neutrality (*vis-à-vis* the criticisms of Max Weber as to the de-humanising nature of classic hierarchical bureaucracy).

Overall, therefore, the notion of public value creation recognises that there is a strong moral imperative placed on the public manager that results from their reliance on coercion for their provision of the resources at their disposal, matched with a need to balance the provision of immediate services to client groups against societal benefits (such as the aggregate benefit of their action, the effective choice of ends and political accountability).

In terms of engagement activities provide opportunities to leverage public value by:

- directly creating a means by which the public manager can develop their programmatic policy proposals through stakeholder input (at the design, development, reporting and post-implementation review stages);
- expanding the range of stakeholder groups that can form part of the narrative creation process (recognising and incorporating groups beyond direct authorisers and clients, but who may receive public value indirectly);
- accessing a constituency around the policy area directly to mobilise action where political failures or corruption becomes apparent and/or act entrepreneurially to strengthen policy proposals for authorisation; and
- developing a long-term view to ensure that public institutions and not simply immediate programs, are strengthened and sustainable (inter-generational value creation).

Moore, Mark. 1995. *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

An overarching focus on a *strategic planning* approach has been matched in recent years with a renewed concern for local community development and empowerment as a critical element in program implementation. Combined, these trends lead to greater:

- emphasis on public servants acting *entrepreneurially* to create public value through innovation and responsiveness across all levels of government;
- social inclusion and capacity building at the local level to develop various forms of *social capital* that sustains communities through capacity building and the development of community resilience (see Exhibit 3); and
- renewed interest in inter-organisational *collaboration and partnerships* between government, private-sector and community groups and across organisational divisions within government.

Exhibit 3: eEngagement and Social Capital – Chicken and Egg

Social Capital represents the idea that there is value in community. That is, that the social ties that bind communities and individuals together produce a range of positive benefits (psychological as well as material) that make vibrant communities more healthy and resistant to change than those with low levels of interpersonal contact, trust and shared norms and concerns.

In the public policy context, the recognition of the value of community ties is not new. Post-war policy failures associated with the US ‘great society’ projects of Lyndon B. Johnson identified a lack of planning around the social supports that brace policy delivery and the 1970s saw renewed interest in ‘communities’ as loci for policy development and implementation. Over the last decade and a half, the notion of social capital has renewed public-sector interest in the role governments can have in developing and strengthening communities. It is now common for public servants to talk of the role of governments in ‘investing’ in social capital, or the implications of different levels of social capital on program delivery and program effectiveness.

Social capital has clear implications for the eEngagement practitioner:³ First, public engagement is fundamentally tied to social capital. This can be through the role of community-based engagement activities in developing new or renewed ties within the community (a ‘bringing together’ process), assisting in the development of shared understandings and values, or through the aggregation and exchange of resources held within the community. In this way, the consultative process of co-decision-making can move to one of co-production, where the social capital developed during consultation can be tasked towards partial or

³ van den Hoof, Bart, de Ridder, Jan and Aukema, Eline. 2004. ‘Exploring the Eagerness to Share Knowledge: The Role of Social Capital and ICT in Knowledge Sharing’. *Social Capital and Information Technology*. Huysman and Wulf (eds), MIT Press, Cambridge.

complete program delivery. The benefits that this can bring in terms of community 'ownership' of the resultant policy can be considerable.

Second, public engagement can be dependent on levels of social capital in the community: where social ties are weak and trust is low, public engagement processes need to invest considerably more time in establishing shared understanding of the 'rules of the game' (consultation and participation processes), the basic nature of the issues under consideration and earning of trust.

Overall, social capital is commonly associated with social networks and therefore has a strong relationship to networking technologies. In recent years the term 'social media' has come to describe a range of technologies (such as social networking websites, blogs, wikis) where users have a key role in the creation of content and therefore the value associated with the service. These services represent a good example of social capital: while the underlying technology (such as the website) serves as a facilitator for collective action and benefit, the participation of members and the relationship between members serves as the primary generator of value. For a good guide to social media, see: Cook, Trevor and Hopkins, Lee. 2006. *Social Media or, 'How I learned to stop worrying and love communication'*, <<http://trevorcook.typepad.com/weblog/files/CookHopkins-SocialMediaWhitePaper.pdf>>

1.3. The Information Society and its Implications

As we move into an era characterised by an abundance of information and communications channels, the growth of new information technologies has challenged many traditional assumptions about the relationship between government and citizens. The ubiquity of information technology in developed societies acts to reduce the public sector's significant control over on policy-related information and the interactive nature of these technologies empowers citizens to form coalitions, mobilise opinion and engage with decision-makers.

This may lead to the emergence of 'electronically-facilitated democracies': political jurisdictions where the political process is conducted through a variety of electronic systems. These developments also have a number of implications. First, public sector managers need to understand that the community has the capacity to be far better educated and informed than in any other period of time. This move towards an *information society* means that:

- members of the public are less willing to accept government decisions based on *appeals to authority* alone, transparency of decision-making is needed;

- they have greater means to challenge the analysis and decision-making of government through their own expertise and information — *participation is often demanded*; and
- *communities of interest* (stakeholder groups, interest groups) need not be geographically-defined, can arise spontaneously and can play active roles in facilitating (or preventing) implementation.

Exhibit 4: The Information Society – Definition

A society characterised by a high level of information intensity in the everyday life of most citizens, in most organisations and workplaces; by the use of common or compatible technology for a wide range of personal, social, educational and business activities; and by the ability to transmit and receive digital data rapidly between places irrespective of distance.

IBM Community Development Foundation, 1997

Second, it must be recognised that the technological environment in which government operates is more complex and diverse. This can be seen in:

- a new emphasis on *multi-channel service delivery*: single-channel communications strategies are increasingly ineffective in reaching broad target audiences. Members of the public increasingly expect a flexible interface with government and they expect to be offered a choice of technologies through which to access services. This is particularly true of younger people who have grown up with internet technologies and mobile telephones;
- the *low cost* of electronic communication is significant. It increases the *speed* of information distribution, stimulates ‘virtual’ interest groups and provides an array of channels by which the public can communicate with elected representatives and public servants. The advent of email, in particular, has seen a growth in the correspondence received and generated by government. This is also manifest in ‘information overload’ and issues associated with the correct storage, presentation and indexing of information;⁴ and
- new technologies *break down boundaries* between organisations and jurisdictions. Public interest groups are more engaged with ‘sister’ organisations around the world – sharing information and strategies, while public servants are using these technologies to increase policy-learning and professional networking.

While some governments have developed specific ‘electronic democracy’ policy agendas (e.g. Queensland), it is important to recognise that the development of

⁴ Often referred to as the ease of ‘discoverability’ of information held in publicly-accessible information systems, or in corporate archives.

Australia and New Zealand as electronically-facilitated democracies is both *deliberate* and *organic* in character: governments can elect to use Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) instrumentally for consensus-building and policy development, but will also be subject to a range of demands from new groups in the community who have used these tools to mobilise politically.

The implications for effective and orderly public administration in information societies will be profound, requiring:

- public sector organisations that are responsive to their changing technological and social environment. This requires appropriate structures, skills and resources within these organisations;
- appropriate policy frameworks to foster and support the active role of the public in policy development and implementation;
- appropriately developed, managed and targeted electronic democracy initiatives to address issues of public disenchantment with government;
- learning organisations that recognise the highly fluid and largely unknown nature of the relationship between new technologies and policy processes; and
- clear recognition of the value of traditional forms of community consultation and engagement. New methods are introduced within the context of parliamentary democracy and many members of our community will continue to rely on 'conventional' media and participatory forms.

Being responsive to the communities' expectation of government communications will require an awareness of technological developments and community norms and expectations.

Exhibit 5: eDemocracy as an 'Evolving Concept'

'I think we often speak as if there is a completed project called "democracy" and there is another completed project called "the internet" and we ask "what will this thing called the internet do to this thing called democracy?". Both of these are in a state of evolution. We haven't got a completed democracy; we haven't got a completed internet. Both are up for grabs. So the question we need to ask is whether the internet is likely to reinforce traditional ways of doing politics, which has tended to be rather remote from the public. Or whether the internet, as an interactive medium, can enable the public to get into a more collaborative and conversational style of politics which makes it more meaningful to them.'

Professor Stephen Coleman, Oxford Internet Institute, 2004