Foreword

In this monograph, Peter Chen has successfully performed a difficult balancing act by producing a coherent and comprehensive guide that is well grounded both conceptually and theoretically. Peter's task was made the more difficult by the fact that he is also writing about concepts that are highly contested, such as 'public value' or 'social capital'. Moreover, the policy and social landscape he traverses is continually evolving and shifting, driven by successive waves of emerging technologies and societal adaptations to technology-enabled communication.

Australians are enthusiastic adopters of mature technologies. It was once said, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that Australia had more fax machines *per capita* than any developed industrialised country. Whatever the truth of such (possibly apocryphal) assertions, complex information and communication technologies (ICTs) now permeate every aspect of our daily lives. They are a crucial component of good public administration and policy delivery to the community.

The Australian public sector has embraced the promise of complex ICTs, albeit with perhaps greater reticence and less in the way of best practice than the private sector. But, as Chen argues, our public sectors are not necessarily the most adept embracers of ICTs. When ICTs are adopted, they may well not be utilised optimally or effectively, which may be explained partly by cultural and structural divides within organisations between technology guardians and end-users.

Chen examines the wide range of ICTs that might be employed to enable citizen engagement and participation in policy-making and program implementation. In addition to explaining the strengths and limitations of various ICTs, he explores the variety of circumstances in which they might be used and, importantly, alerts the reader to the opportunities they present or the pitfalls they entail.

The result is an engaging, provocative and thorough survey of available technologies and potential applications. This is a 'must read' for policy and program practitioners who are considering options for electronic engagement.

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