

# **Gov 2.0: Online engagement or a neo-liberal Trojan Horse?**

Dr Peter John Chen

Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney

[peter.chen@sydney.edu.au](mailto:peter.chen@sydney.edu.au)

## **Abstract**

This paper examines arguments about “gov 2.0” by looking at the underlying ideological basis of the concept. While commonly framed in terms of civic empowerment and participation, I argue that gov 2.0 rests on a particular model of the liberal state and subject that reveals its roots in the political and economic culture of the United States. These assumptions are largely unrecognised or undiscussed by advocates, which makes their political implications opaque when taken out of context. In addition, the definitional ambiguity of the term in popular use has limited lesson drawing from other government ICT initiatives (e-service delivery and e-democracy). Viewing the transformation of government from a set of institutions and processes to a “platform” is predicated on a positive notion of liberty that shares little with the contemporary expectations of government as a pro-active provider of services, and agent of last resort. The notion draws uncritically on two traditions: that of Habermas's public sphere, and the free market as an optimal regulator. Both have an improved notion of human agency and capacity, which stem from their bias towards an utopian notion of publicity and citizenship.

Word count: 8092; for comment

Paper presented at the Parliamentary Library Lecture Series, Australian Parliament

House, Canberra 22nd June 2011.

## **Introduction**

The implications of the new information and communications technologies (ICTs) on government and political practice have been of particular interest to policy scholars and practitioners. The powerful nature of technologies that reduce the impact of distance and scarcity on the creation and distribution of informational goods has implications for the formation of policy: allowing the collection, aggregation, creation, storage and distribution of policy-relevant information more rapidly and cheaply. Governments have had a long historical involvement in the development of computers and their application for public administration (the earliest computers were commissioned for military code-breaking and census taking applications), computerisation of the public sector has been of specific interest since the 1970s as a means of tackling issues of the fiscal crisis of the state through cost reduction in administration. More recently, however, discussion of computerisation has shifted from the *automation* of government activities, to their *transformation* and reform.

This paper is concerned with the idea of “Government 2.0”, commonly referred to as “gov 2.0”, and its implications for the practice of political and public administration in Australia. To do so I first explore the contested definitions of the concept and its relationship with previous government ICT-related modernisation initiatives. From this I propose that gov 2.0 contains a range of implicit assumptions that are imported from its origins in the information technology industries and the specific political imaginary of the United States that are often not clearly identified or recognised by its proponents. This has implications for the type of transformation the concept may bring if realised in Australia, but also questions the likelihood of success of gov 2.0 initiatives given many of

the underlying cultural and social expectations it is grounded in may not exist in this country. Finally, the paper makes some observations about how the positive aspects of the idea could be more fruitfully introduced in the Australian context.

## **What does gov 2.0 mean?**

The notion of government 2.0 is an amorphous concept and subject to competing definitions. The term has its origins in another socio-technological change, the introduction of what is called “web 2.0”, combined with a broader idea of the role of modern computers and computer networking and realising significant social changes. This is not a new concept, philosophers have long discussed the impact of media technologies on the nature of human society, from antiquity (Socrates, for example, argued that writing reduced the power of memory) to more contemporary writers, like McLuhan's notion of media as an “extension” of human capacities (1964). Web 2.0 itself is not a specific technology<sup>1</sup>, but an approach to developing interactive services for the internet. Schroth and Janner (2007:36-7) talk about web 2.0 as a “philosophy” of design that focuses on the creation of “mutually maximising collective intelligence and adding value for each participant by formalised and dynamic information sharing and creation”. Web 2.0 is often illustrated in popular parlance by talking about the “read-write web”: an emerging internet where users are increasingly able to interact with the material online, to contribute to it, and thereby create collective goods. Blogs, wikis, and mashups tend to characterise this environment: where the internet moves from active information seekers to “produsers” (producer-users; Bruns, 2008). In this shift, a range of assumptions about

---

<sup>1</sup> Though, in its early iterations it was commonly associated with the web development methods commonly described as AJAX (asynchronous JavaScript and XML). These allowed webpages, once static “repositories” to become increasingly interactive and dynamic.

the roles of “audiences” also shifts, encouraging the “cult of the amateur” (Sharkey, 2008) and the inversion of traditional forms of publishing process (such as “social filtering” rather than pre-publication editing).

Thus, the internet is seen to be a “disruptive technology”: having successive and cumulative impacts on the existing social, economic and political order. We have seen this with the considerable economic disruption to a wide range of pre-existing media industries - such as the considerable impact on the economics of news production through the dilution of advertising revenues. We have seen this in the way social networking services recreate, but also change (remediate) the nature of social relationships: allowing them to be maintained with greater ease, but also introducing new forms of relationship and the “quantification” or “informationalisation” of our social world. It's not surprising, therefore, for the political realm to be affected by the rise of ICTs by altering power relations and upending the status quo. While this has happened automatically in response to some of these changes (for example, the introduction of “microfundraising” in the US context has considerably altered the way political parties and candidates see ordinary voters), the notion of gov 2.0 attempts to utilise aspects of these technologies to deliberately bring about more specific and positive changes to political practice.

In Australia, following similar high-level endorsement of the idea as seen with the new Obama presidency in US, the then Rudd-Labor government created the Government 2.0 Taskforce (“the Taskforce”) to investigate the utility of the idea. Presenting an enthusiastic report to government, the Taskforce defined gov 2.0 as:

... a public policy shift to create a culture of openness and transparency, where

*government is willing to engage with and listen to its citizens; and to make available the vast national resource of non-sensitive public sector information (PSI). Government 2.0 empowers citizens and public servants alike to directly collaborate in their own governance by harnessing the opportunities presented by technology. (2010:1)*

In specifically calling on the adoption of gov 2.0, the Taskforce highlighted three areas for reform: Opening of the public sector's culture to greater levels of transparency and engagement with the public; Explicit use of web 2.0 technologies by government organisations to achieve the former, and produce collaborative outcomes, and; The release of increasing amounts of public sector information into the digital commons. In this way gov 2.0 picks up on a number of recent trends in public sector reform: First, it has strong affiliations with earlier writing on New Public Management that encouraged public managers to move out of the background and engage with members of the public more directly to create “public value” through engagement and entrepreneurship (Moore, 1995). The direct co-option of what is seen as successful private-sector models of management reflects an ongoing search for the solution of the fiscal and legitimacy crises of the state. Second, in seeing collaborations with citizens and a wide range of organisations, the notion of gov 2.0 also captures the pragmatic approach of the “third way” models of public-private partnerships as proposed by the early Blair-Labour government in the UK.

This take on the promise of gov 2.0 has been strongly pushed by the thinker most commonly associated with the term, and the originator of the term web 2.0: technology publisher Tim O'Reilly. O'Reilly draws upon examples from the technology sector to

demonstrate the power of web 2.0 design approaches in creating innovation and value (2009a). This focus on the effectiveness of business in delivering service value has particular resonance in the Australian public sector under successive governments who have looked to market mechanisms as solutions to public sector inefficiencies. The report and its emphasis on co-option of private sector strategies to create public value therefore fell on fertile ground. Lindsay Tanner, one of the Ministers responsible for the Taskforce, unfavourably compared the performance of public sector organisations in providing correspondence to members of the public with fast food restaurants in his 1999 technology and policy book *Open Australia*. In 2011, he reiterated this by emphasising the relationship between gov 2.0 and lesson-drawing from sectors with strong traditions of innovation (CeBIT, 2011).

## ***Gov 2.0 and the e-democracy experience in Australia***

The current interest in gov 2.0 is not the first time that Australia has embraced technology as a new model for political action. With the development of the internet, Australian governments of all types became interested in its use to deliver services, provide information to the community, and serve as a channel for interaction with citizens. The larger governments have predominantly been attracted to the use of these technologies for service delivery and cost-reduction purposes, and Australia was seen as a leader in electronic and online service delivery through much of the period of the Howard Government (United Nations, 2005:25). Initiatives like the introduction of eTax and the eCensus demonstrate how online services can assist in reducing citizens' compliance costs through automation. These developments have Australians increasingly interacting

with government using online service portals (OECD, 2009).<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Australia has had a mixed history of experimentation with new forms of democratic practice employing ICTs, with many initial “electronic democracy” initiatives (such as online discussion fora employed by local and state governments) being quickly wound back or cancelled. The majority of these initiatives are what are best described as “programmatic e-democracy”: top-down initiatives designed and implemented by government organisations in the same manner as any other service. As such they often sit within public service delivery paradigms, such as the automation of existing services (online petitions, for example) or applications of existing policy models (such as jurisdictional consultation manuals). To generalise, many of these initiatives at the local, state and federal level have been deemed to be unsuccessful, largely due to low levels of take up. However, the underlying causes of failure are often due to: Excessive planned risk avoidance that reduces the utility of the service (such as strict participation control, or functional limitations due to the - not unfounded - fear of system misuse); A tendency to place systems within government domain spaces, rather than undertake partnerships with civic groups to place them in existing organisational settings, and; Limited stakeholder commitment to the initiatives (Anderson and Bishop, 2005). The last factor often sees these initiatives never existing “pilot” testing, and having no visible connection to policy-making processes. Partially this is the result of limited interest in the idea of e-democracy compared with the investment of e-service delivery (thereby instrumentalising the perception of government-citizen interactions), but also this stemmed from poor-lesson

---

<sup>2</sup> The extent of Australia's success may be queried to some degree, as many of the initiatives represent “low hanging fruit” (automation rather than substantive transformation). Australia's record of cross-jurisdictional services remains more limited.

drawing from advocates like Stephen Clift (who visited Australia frequently in the late 1990s and early 2000s to talk about his experiences with Minnesota E-Democracy) whereby the technologies of these initial online virtual spaces were emulated by governments, but often without observing the situation of the projects in civil society (Backhouse, 2007).

In theory, therefore, gov 2.0 has the potential to revitalise this area of consideration by ensuring that the use of web 2.0 technology and release of PSI occurs with a strong focus on the formation of user communities: communities clustered around the online dialectic space of public servants' own blogs, participation in others' blogs, or with an interest in the use of PSI. By using tools that are less strictly, or not at all controlled by government, gov 2.0 prevents the natural risk aversion that led to many of the e-democracy initiatives remaining hidden from public view and disconnected from actual policy-making.

This allows us to ask to what extent gov 2.0, through the fostering of spaces for civic interaction and the data for rational dialogue, provides for the development of genuine and generative public engagement with the sphere of government. In the past, this was seen as being a function of “place making”. Dahlberg (2001), for example, talked about e-democracy initiatives in the US as examples of sites for public opinion formation, introducing the idea of the internet as a “new public sphere”. This view has been picked up more recently in looking at web 2.0 environments as “natural” rather than constructed sites for civic discourse and opinion formation. Using the example of video-sharing site YouTube, Ubayasiri (2006) argues that these places provide a great fragmented set of

interactive spaces for political socialisation.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Murray (2010) has argued the contemporary internet is a place "... where political discourse may more freely be exchanged between the proletariat and the bourgeois, and one where thanks to the pseudonymity offered speech is less susceptible to chilling effects. This attractive prospect has encouraged many academics to discuss the 'virtual public sphere' as an extension of Habermas's original public sphere". This is an expansive claim, and one that rests at the heart of gov 2.0's capacity to revitalise the e-democracy project. It is also, I argue, one with considerable problems and flaws.

### **Mixed metaphors: Public spheres and marketplaces of ideas**

The problem presented by the notion of the public sphere is its tendency to be used without due regards to the scope and limitations of the concept. Popularised following the translation of Habermas's work in *The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere* (1991), the idea of the public sphere is a very historically-specific one. Habermas argues that the rise of the educated bourgeoisie sees the development of a culture of public engagement and debate supported by emerging journalism. This process rests on enlightenment rationalism: the notion that truth (vis-a-vis John Stuart Mill, 2009) is not the preserve of specific institutions or traditions (such as the Church), but can be determined through active participation in reason and debate. The educated and time-rich bourgeois class, according to Habermas, is able to gather and reflect on issues of public concern in salons and coffee houses to determine their shared public interest. This also requires the end of monarchical rule - with its arbitrary exercise of power - and an emerging consensus on the separation of the private sphere, the public sphere, and

---

3 This is not to say these views are universal, as early as 1995 Poster argued that the analogy between the public sphere and the internet was a poor one.

the sphere of government. Additionally, the notion of the public sphere is not simply synonymous with “public opinion”, but only comes into its own when these publics mobilise their views and opinions into the governmental realm. These public spheres are performative in nature, they come in and out of existence, rather than transcending their production and being reified as public opinion.

The limitations of this proposal are numerous, both in the historical context proposed by Habermas, and also as an analogy for new media communities today. Fraser (1990) was one of the early observers to attack the public sphere for failing to recognise both diversity and alternative spaces for the formation of “counter-publics”. Using the example of women, but this might also apply to other (formally or informally) disenfranchised groups (such as labour at the time), these criticisms note the contested nature of rationalism as being constructed of those views and opinions formed by a small and elite group of men. This is not, actually a criticism of Habermas's argument *per se*, as much as a criticism of the notion of government based on negative liberty *in toto*: the public spheres of Habermas's historical review were exclusive men's clubs, and their ability to form a relatively cohesive set of opinions about what government should do was based on a comparatively narrow definition of the public interest. For a small, emerging class of professionals and business people, the development of a minimal state that ensured the provision of key public goods infrastructure, a system of laws and rules to allow citizens to interact and engage in trade in an effective way (contract law), and national defence. It is not surprising that this period of time sees the emergence of contemporary capitalism as a meta ideology which influences views of what is good and right in both public and private life (Salvatore, 2007:216).

For Habermas, it is the expansion of the scope of the state that lies at the heart of the decline of this public sphere: the welfare state places “spoils” into the public arena for groups to compete to access. This is an argument very well developed through the insights of public choice theory and analysis of the conditions that favour rent seeking (e.g. concentrated benefits and diffused costs; Farber and Frickey, 1991:24). Under the historical diagnosis of the public sphere, it is not the decline of the “space” for civic participation that sees the end of the bourgeois public sphere, but the changing nature of the state and expectations we hold of the state. Australia, “born modern” with strong state provision of welfare and the material conditions for private production, has never experienced Habermas's classic public sphere. To reconstruct a society that was predicated on such fanciful public spheres, therefore, would be to adopt a radical liberalism that has not been seen globally for hundreds of years (if ever) and was never part of the state settlement of Australia.

Hannah Arendt (1958:38-49) has diagnosed this problem as the “rise of the social”: the tendency for private production to come out of the home and into the public realm. Thus, where people were once free in the public realm because they had escaped the day-to-day concerns of “economy”, the development of production that comes with advanced capitalism tends to force the process of identity formation and political articulation into the private realm. This has particular resonance with Australia, which is a country that has tended not to have a strong history of public expressiveness with regards to political points of view. The long-running Australian Election Study shows in the last two decades that less than five percent of Australians frequently engage in direct political discussion in an attempt to influence others' vote (McAllister and Clarke, 2008:45). What we find in Australian political discourse, therefore, tends to be an

emphasis on mass opinion, rather than the opinion of individuals. This reflects Arendt's argument about the loss of freedom on the public sphere with its contamination by economy: "it made excellence anonymous, emphasised the progress of mankind rather than the achievements of men, changed the content of the public realm beyond recognition". It is unsurprising, therefore, that we see a lot of public political discussion and contemporary journalism based around a particular concern for public opinion polling results. This "horserace" form of coverage has a range of causes beyond the scope of this paper,<sup>4</sup> but there is a tendency to focus on opinion formation as a choice between two alternatives, rather than a process by which political opinions can be formed.

The upshot of this is that while we tend to rhetorically favour public spheres, with their implied warm cosiness, public opinion is seen in stark methodological terms: defined by positivist social science's development of the survey instrument, forced-choice decision making (to increase response rates), and statistical inference that blurs correlation and causation. This means that, in practice we tend towards a model of political decision making more commonly associated with the "marketplace of ideas": which sees participants as bringing preferences into the political realm fully-formed and working to aggregate them together into simple majorities (Erikson, et al., 1991). In mass society, this technocratic mechanism for opinion formation clearly solidifies views that may not be firmly held (Bourdieu, 1979), but also speaks to a conception of society underpinned by a more radical individualism than tends to be the norm in Australia (Herbst, 1991). Thus, as Sunstein (1993) observes "[a]ggregate or marketplace notions disregard the extent to which political outcomes are supposed to depend on discussion and debate, or a

---

4 For example, the regularisation of news production through control of the production of polling results by media organisations.

commitment to political equality, and on the reasons offered for or against alternatives.”

## **Governments as “platforms”, platforms for whom?**

The upshot of this argument relates to the direct importation, through uncritical adoption of dialogue about gov 2.0, of a range of norms that may have particular implications for the practice of policy-making in a gov 2.0 environment. Heeks, writing about the transfer of ICT initiatives between different political cultures, sees these programs as “carriers of context” (2005:58). He employs case analysis to demonstrate how technological adoption can lead to the unintended transfer of the assumptions of systems designers. While focused on explaining the considerable under-performance of government electronic and online service delivery projects because of misfits between administrative and political cultures, this work highlights how underlying computer code can be important in structuring the behaviours of individuals who use these systems (Giddens, 1984). As Lessig (ongoing) has argued, the core technical standards of systems can shape outcomes in specific ways through control over what systems can and cannot do. Under the expression “code is law” he argues for ICTs to be seen through a lens of soft determinism: new media technologies can have neo-institutional characteristics in the way they facilitate particular forms of behaviours and actions. Similarly, we can see how the absence of specific aspects of technical standards also limits the potential for social regulation. A good example of the latter would be the end-to-end nature of the internet's core TCP-IP protocol and the limitations this places on national governments to regulate online content. Given this, it is important to recognise what context ideas about gov 2.0 might carry. This will provide indications of the political, as well as practical implications of the idea for Australian public life.

The first point of consideration is the way in which gov 2.0 constructs citizenship. In his discussion of the potential benefits of the idea, O'Reilly (2009b) is clear in seeing the relationship between the state and the citizen as not one of top-down service provision ("vending-machine government"), but as fundamentally participative: citizenship is not restricted to procedural participation in elections and services. In this way the citizen should not see government as the guarantee of a minimum set of rights (democratic) or benefits, but as a place for self-actualisation. This argument reflects a very classical notion of the liberal state, such as the public sphere as a site of freedom seen by Arendt. This notion also depends on the active and informed citizen, and one who is able to recognise their own needs, and act upon them in a meaningful way. This separation between the political and apolitical citizen has long been theorised in pluralist notions of American citizenship in a way that has seen the passive citizen as one who's made a rational decision because of their essential satisfaction with the status quo (see Dahl (1960) for example). That this has been picked up in the concept of gov 2.0 is evidenced by O'Reilly's use of classic texts in American politics as the basis for his arguments (2009b).

The second, and flip-side of the first, is the view that gov 2.0 has of the nature of the state. In O'Reilly's (2009a) discussion of "government as a platform", he argues that government should see itself in the same manner as a web 2.0 provider: as a basis upon which civic action can be undertaken, not a distributor, regulator, or arena. This lies at the core of the argument about the value of the concept. Many advocates of gov 2.0 cite the power of the internet to overcome classic collective action problems. This stems from their view of the comparatively "frictionless" nature of the internet in reducing

barriers to participation. Using examples like the Linux operating system or Wikipedia, it is clear to see that co-ordinated voluntarism can develop social artefacts of considerable value (Bimber, et al., 2005; Wilkinson and Huberman, 2007). Thus, these arguments have merit, and the power of collaborative co-creation, in circumstances where it has worked, has been shown to be considerable. We should quibble, however, with some of the key examples often cited as exemplar “bottom-up” projects such as initiatives like Wikipedia, the Firefox web browser, and the Libreoffice/OpenOffice.org productivity suite. Each of these began as, or ran parallel to, conventional projects that were then “open-sourced” (Nupedia, Netscape Navigator, StarOffice). In addition, some of the key institutional supporters for these projects have been commercial interests which have had economic motivations in increasing competition in the marketplace (such as Google's support for Firefox to open up new markets to its search engine, or Sun's support for OpenOffice.org to reduce the market dominance of Microsoft's key cash-cow products).<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, we need to question what implications the open-source model has as a governance model. The generative aspect of these projects is commonly associated with the adhocratic organising model commonly employed as the overarching management structure for the projects. Given the strengths and limitations of this model, it is not surprising that the most effective projects are those that are divisible into discrete tasks that can be delivered incrementally (e.g. Linux distributions and their use of “rolling

---

5 This point needs development, certainly the role of Google in encouraging the development of browsers to rival the dominant Internet Explorer did not just have commercial value to Google, but also served to develop the web platform considerably. Internet Explorer, as a once near monopoly provider of web access, fell into a prolonged period of time in which it was not developed. OpenOffice.org did help to push the case for open standards for documents which has had an impact on existing market players, but this largely benefited insurgent projects.

updates”), rather than projects that require cohesive structure (such as the *A Million Penguins* wikibook initiative, described as “unreadable”; Mason and Thomas, 2008). Given their rejection of conventional government management styles and processes, it is not surprising that what is attractive to proponents of gov 2.0 about adhocracy is its ends-orientation. Processes in this model are generally a secondary consideration to the adoption of “what works” (Hayes, 2001: 128). In this it encourages participation by “everyday makers” (Bang and Sørensen, 1999): hit-and-run individuals who want to have an impact without a commitment to long-term memberships or ongoing formal entities. This is evidenced by research which demonstrates that projects like Wikipedia are predominantly written by large numbers of contributors, each of whom contribute small amounts to the overall project, rather than just a core group of highly productive individuals (Ortega and González-Barahona, 2007).

The de-emphasis of process and leadership is problematic for government, particularly in places where resource allocation and legal proceduralism are required (i.e. most of government activity, as conventionally defined). Additionally, as Rouke and Schulman (1989) observe, the historical use of adhocracy by governments tends to be found in commissions of inquiry, investigations into disaster, and responses to sudden systemic shocks that signal a period of exception, where normal processes and procedures have broken down (see also, Mendonça, et al., 2007). The problem with these types of organisational systems, they contend, comes in the lack of accountability these types of decision-making arrangements bring and the relatively arbitrary treatment of rights by decision makers. This is present in some of the exemplars cited by O'Reilly, such as the Apple iPhone. In recent years Apple has come under considerable criticism for its internal processes of reviewing and approving applications that can run on its platforms.

The company has been criticised for taking a conservative approach to the approval of material with adult content (including restricting graphic novels of classic literature) and refusing to publish political cartoons (Tate, 2010).<sup>6</sup> Arguments that the internet, by nature, automatically disintermediates hierarchies (social, economic, political) has not been born out in practice: the iTunes/App Store model itself represents a process of reintermediation and the reinsertion of Apple as an intermediary because it has control over a key point in the distribution chain where rents can be accessed.

Third, and developing from the point above, is the idea that gov 2.0 has to be recognised as the transmission of approaches and models from the very leading edge of online business practice. The focus on web 2.0 business models as the key technical example of what gov 2.0 might look like in practice presents problems, largely because of the highly uncertain nature of “success” in the web 2.0 environment. If we take an example of the interactive and flexible photo sharing service Flickr we see a good example of how unstable online properties and services can be: lauded in 2007 as a web 2.0 pioneer (an online content aggregation, storage, indexing, social networking, and editing service) which insulated Yahoo! against its search rival Google (Sterling, 2007), by 2010 its fortunes were flagging as casual photo sharing moved rapidly to Facebook. This “social flocking” presents a problem in retaining value in online properties, a risk the private sector is willing to take, but one less likely to be tolerated with public resources. Governments often are required to grandfather projects that the private sector would just let die, something we can see clearly in the comparative fates of online hosting services GeoCities (closed in 2009) and the State Library of Victoria's

---

<sup>6</sup> Should this surprise us? Consider the example of the physical public-private space: the shopping mall, and its owners tolerance of unregulated speech-acts.

MC<sup>2</sup> initiative.

Governments have history, whereas the internet has very little. Thus, the promotion of gov 2.0 carries a strong valorisation of the work of the private sector in creating public goods, omitting those who have crashed out along the way. O'Reilly identifies the best examples of platform providers as those economically successful parts of the IT industry:

*... every big winner has been a platform company: someone whose success has enabled others, who've built on their work and multiplied its impact. Microsoft put "a PC on every desk and in every home," the internet connected those PCs, Google enabled a generation of ad-supported startups, Apple turned the phone market upside down by letting developers loose to invent applications no phone company would ever have thought of. In each case, the platform provider raised the bar, and created opportunities for others to exploit.*

More recently O'Reilly (2010) has drawn an even stronger analogy between the gov 2.0 as a bountiful “supermarket” full of products, compared with gov 1.0 as a soviet system of supply.

This reliance on a very specific section of the private sector as a paradigm for public production is a problematic example for a number of reasons. First, the analogy is weak. The examples employed have the tendency to overstate the similarities of the business models that made these companies successful; for example Google's open-access tools most likely to be used in gov 2.0 mashups, such as Google Maps, are not a major part of the company's core economic strength (its vanilla search is). Second, it implies “platform” is an open and participative concept, which is not necessarily the case. There are considerable differences between the provision of software for undifferentiated clone

computers by Microsoft and the locked-down environment of Apple under Steve Jobs's most recent tenure (Zittrain, 2007:3), as we've previously discussed. Criticiss of Job's company's approach to censorship is that it lacks rigour in process. Responses tend to be ad hoc and based on aggregate popular opinion in the marketplace. This latter tendency has been seen in the differential treatment of adult graphic novels, with strong preference given to those that display heteronormative content. Additionally, while Google may have "enabled a generation of ad-supported startups", it eats its young when it feels the need (for example, the acquisitions of YouTube, Blogger, Picasa, and the online documents suite components among many others). Finally, but most importantly, by discounting the experiences of public management, the gov 2.0 initiatives fail to learn simple lessons from the recent history of openness initiatives. A good example is criticisms of recent government open data initiatives as simply "compliance" through the aggregation of existing low quality data sets, rather than provision of genuinely useful data (Information Week, 2010). Not only does the production of useful "open" data require a considerable investment by the data providers to clean, annotate and standardise what might have been a very idiosyncratic set of data, but as experiences with Freedom of Information laws show, the use of open information tends towards a degree of risk-aversion by public organisations (who are more likely to be "punished" than rewarded by journalists and oppositions; Snell, 2002). Risk adverse organisations are the antithesis of the entrepreneurial and innovative: particularly when the comparator is private sector start-ups, While the Government 2.0 Taskforce called for more openness as a normative good, there's little in the report, or other formulations of the model that demonstrates an understanding of the drivers behind the inevitable tensions in government over openness and secrecy.

The forth point of consideration is the extent to which gov 2.0 actually asks government to emulate the dot.com heroes presented. If we look at the definition of gov 2.0 developed by the consulting firm Gartner, gov 2.0 is defined as “the use of IT to socialize and commoditize government services, processes and data.” (Di Maio, 2009). This is strongly brought through in the Taskforce report, which places one of its three pillars of gov 2.0 as the release of public sector information with “additional rights of access, rights to freely reuse, republish, repurpose and otherwise add value to government information”. The point of this recommendation is that large amounts of potential value sit in Crown copyright government information, that if harnessed by entrepreneurial individuals could create new value and expand the public investment in the collection of this data. While this idea may have merit, it does not emulate any of the strategies of success used by the exemplar companies of O'Reilly's list. Companies like Microsoft flourished on the back of commodity hardware provided by other firms: effectively adding value to its proprietary products and services by lowering the comparative adoption costs of its platform and one with high switching costs through proprietary file formats. Google only provides its information as a service, not in machine readable raw form: its value-added database of websites is a major part of its “secret sauce” and one it defends viciously (attacking rivals who attempt to reverse engineer Google's search results to improve their own products; Singhal, 2011). Google's release of data on trends and other statistics are commonly only provided in a form that is not machine readable and does not provide comparative axes. GetUp, the popular online protest facilitator and strong user of Internet technologies, does not share its databases, even with collaborating organisations (Law Report, 2008). Where online firms have made the types of data releases gov 2.0 proponents call on, unanticipated problems have emerged. A good example is the release of three months of “de-identified” search data by AOL in

2006 for researchers working on search technology (Kirk, 2006). This data was quickly analysed by members of the public and used to identify individuals from the raw material by looking at the text of successive search queries. It's not surprising that members of the Taskforce (which included a representative from Google Australia) would call on the release of government data: the indexing and use of data is what has made that company wealthy. That these types of unidentified and subsidiary use activities run counter to the general thrust of privacy debates is a subject that has gained scarce attention.

At the core of gov 2.0 lies a reliance on the revised classical political liberalism of the internet economy. Comparatively under-regulated, transnational and with a Darwinian attitude towards success and failure, the internet's social and business ethos sits neatly with the liberal state of the classic public sphere period, but in an era where the capabilities of individuals (real or artificial) to amass considerable and disproportionate economic and social power is magnified by technology. This presents a concern about the impact of this set of ideologically-invested technologies into the domestic context. Particularly as this draws largely from a political environment without the Australian focus on egalitarianism as a positive task of government. It is not clear that open platforms will contribute to goals of social empowerment as much as further the knowledge gap that stems from the stratification of educational opportunities we see emerging as a result of unequal access to the information and training that builds information literacies.

Additionally, in an environment dominated by government-as-platform, we run the risk of seeing those who fail to build on these platforms as unwilling to engage in the self-help available to them. This has key cultural impacts. As Kernohan notes (1998:88): "In an inegalitarian culture, many of the beliefs that people take up from their cultural environment are based on beliefs about the moral inequality of persons ... If people base

their ends in life on these false evaluations, their highest-order interest in coming to know the good will have been harmed.”. In examining neo-liberal education policies, Francis (2006) has argued that the failure to take up “obvious” opportunities discursively recreates these recalcitrants as “the undeserving poor”.

## **Beyond “Gov 2.0”**

Knowing the assumptions and limitations underlying the concept of gov 2.0 allows for a pragmatic engagement with the ideas presented by its proponents. Three key suggestions are provided.

First, the platform of government provides benefits across society where appropriate capabilities and skills exist. As Johnson observes (2011), more recent Labor administrations have begun to think about information equality at a number of levels: through the intervention in markets to more equitably distribute broadband infrastructure, and at the capabilities level through programs like the schools laptops initiative. Clearly governments engaging in gov 2.0 need to think about the information literacy levels of the public in the new media environment. While this will have benefits in facilitating access by citizens to government services online, the benefits are more holistic. Increasingly members of the community are being stratified on the basis of the ability to use ICTs. This is not simply a question of access to employment and education, but has direct economic impacts. For example, recent years have seen a range of new business models online that allow for purchase aggregation and comparative shopping, which can serve to reduce information costs in the marketplace. If only those with higher levels of education are able to fully access these and other services, the benefits of the

information economy are distributed regressively. One of the long-standing problems we face, however, is that information gaps are difficult to overcome, and without special attention to the equalisation of capabilities in society the “rising tide” of the information society will lift all boats equally, but not alter their initial disequalities (Bimber, 2003). This clearly means the need to not only cultivate potentiality by providing platforms, but also ensure citizens have equal capacity to utilise the opportunities provided. This captures a basic tenant of the much-maligned “minimalist” procedural democracy of the ballot box: simplicity and universality.

Second, gov 2.0 needs to think more about Australian pluralism. While much of the utility of PSI is couched in terms of citizens' use, large data sets are likely to be most effectively employed by organisations (public and private) with the informational (hard and soft) abilities to utilise and bring together data. Many of the well publicised gov 2.0 projects have a strong organisational basis, either in public interest civil society organisations (such as [www.theyworkforyou.com](http://www.theyworkforyou.com) and the register charity UK Citizens Online Democracy) or true commercial start-ups (e.g. [www.seeckickfix.com](http://www.seeckickfix.com)). The institutional basis of these initiatives provides them with longevity and, for NGOs, situation within a public interest governance structure. It also does not disintermediate the relationship between the citizen and the state (and where projects may propose this should occur, we are likely to see resistance from existing representative organisations and pressure groups). This has the implication that, rather than simply being a spontaneous response to the availability of government platforms, these relationships are likely to be cultivated and need to have structures that suit the needs of a range of participants. In this way the legitimacy gov 2.0 may bring from being “spontaneous” expressions of collective action may be somewhat illusive.

Finally, the issue of motivation needs to be considered, particularly for public servants and policy makers. While gov 2.0 has explanations for the motivations of non-government institutional (re-intermediation, the provision of enhanced constituency services, mobilisation and member informationalisation) and individual (collaborative co-production, community participation, self-actualisation) participants, the benefits to those in government is unclear. Participation in social media environments remains comparatively limited in scope (politicians' use of Twitter, for example), and it appears most useful in surfing also with the hyperkinetic pace of the media environment, rather than being able to put meaningful structure around its content. Public servants, being pushed towards evidence-based policy making may see benefits in value-adding their datasets, but the folk contributions of blogs and wikis run counter to public discourse which pushes for increased rigour in decision making. Without a serious attempt to demonstrate the ability to overcome considerable political problems in contemporary society, policy makers and senior public servants are as unlikely to adopt the ideas of gov 2.0 as they were e-democracy.

## **References**

- Anderson, Lori and Patrick Bishop, 2005, "E government to E democracy: Communicative mechanisms of governance", *Journal of E Government*, 2:5-26.
- Arendt, Hannah, 1958, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Bang, Henrik and Eva Sørensen, 1999, "The everyday maker: A new challenge to democratic governance", *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 21(3):325-41.
- Bimber, Bruce, 2003, *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution*

- of Political Power*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Bimber, Bruce, Andrew Flanagin and Cynthia Stohl, 2005, "Reconceptualising Collective Action in the Contemporary Media Environment", *Communication Theory*, 15(4):365-88.
- Backhouse, Jennifer, 2007, "e-Democracy in Australia: The challenge of evolving a successful model", *The Electronic Journal of e-Government*, 5(2):107-16.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 1979, "Public opinion does not exist", *Communication and Class Struggle*, Armond Matelart and Seth Siegelaub (eds), New York: International General.
- Brunn, Axel, 2008, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York.
- CeBIT Australia, 2011, "Tanner: Gov 2.0 about culture change, not technology", *CeBIT Australia*, <http://www.cebit.com.au/news/government/tanner-gov2-about-culture-change-not-technology>, accessed: 16 July 2011.
- Dahl, Robert, 1961, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in the American City*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Dahlberg, Lincoln, 2001, "Extending the public sphere through cyberspace: The case of Minnesota E-democracy", *First Monday*, 6(3),  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue6\\_3/dahlberg/index.html](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue6_3/dahlberg/index.html)
- Di Maio, Andrea, 2009, *Government 2.0: A Gartner Definition*, 13 November,  
[http://blogs.gartner.com/andrea\\_dimaio/2009/11/13/government-2-0-a-gartner-definition/](http://blogs.gartner.com/andrea_dimaio/2009/11/13/government-2-0-a-gartner-definition/), accessed: 18 June 2011.
- Erikson, Robert, Norman Luttbeg and Kent Tedin, 1991, *American Public Opinion*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition: New York: Macmillan.
- Farber, Daniel, and Philip Frickey, 1991, *Law and Public Choice: A Critical Introduction*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Francis, Becky, 2006, "Heroes or zeroes? The discursive positioning of 'underachieving boys' in English neo-liberal education policy", *Journal of Education Policy*, 21(2):187-200 .

Fraser, Nancy, 1990, "Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy", *Social Text*, 25/26:56-80.

Giddens, Anthony, 1984, *The Constitution of Society*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Government 2.0 Taskforce, 2010, *Engage: Getting on with Government 2.0*, Australian Government Information Management Office: Canberra.

Guan, Lilia, 2011 "Analysis: Gov 2.0 - a stumbling block?", *Government News*, 31(1):8.

Habermas, Jürgen, 1991, *The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere*, Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (trans), MIT Press, Cambridge.

Hayes, Colin, 2001, *Managing Through Organization: The Management Process, Forms of Organization and the Work of Managers*, Thompson, London.

Heeks, Richard, 2005, "e-Government as a carrier of context", *Journal of Public Policy*, 25:51-74.

Herbst, Susan, 1991, "Classical democracy, polls and public opinion: Theoretical frameworks for studying the development of public sentiment", *Communication Theory*, 1:225-38.

Information Week, 2010, "Gov 2.0 summit: Advocate calls USASpending data 'useless'", *Informationweek - Online*, 7 September.

Johnson, Carol, 2011, "The politics of broadband: Labor and new information technology from Hawke to Gillard", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 46(1):3-19.

Kernohan, Andrew, 1998, *Liberalism, Equality and Cultural Oppression*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Krik, Jeremy, 2006, "AOL search data reportedly released", *PCWorld*, 8 August,

[http://www.pcworld.com/article/126663/aol\\_search\\_data\\_reportedly\\_released.html](http://www.pcworld.com/article/126663/aol_search_data_reportedly_released.html), accessed: 20 June 2011.

Law Report, 2008, "Database disagreement", *The Law Report*, ABC Radio National, 11 March, <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/lawreport/stories/2008/2183680.htm>

Lessig, Lawrence, ongoing, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*, v2 <http://code-is-law.org/>, accessed: 10 June 2011.

Mason, Bruce and Sue Thomas, 2008, *A Million Penguins Research Report* , [www.ioct.dmu.ac.uk/documents/amillionpenguinsreport.pdf](http://www.ioct.dmu.ac.uk/documents/amillionpenguinsreport.pdf)

McAllister, Ian and Juliet Clarke, 2008, *Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Electoral Study 1987-2007*, Australian National University, Canberra.

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

Murray, Andrew, 2010, *Information Technology Law: The Law and Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

O'Reilly, Tim, 2010, "Government as a platform for greatness", gov 2.0 expo, 25-7 May, Washington Convention Centre, Washington DC.

O'Reilly, Tim, 2009a, "Gov 2.0: It's all about the platform", *TechCrunch*, 4 September, <http://techcrunch.com/2009/09/04/gov-20-its-all-about-the-platform/>, accessed: 10 June 2011.

O'Reilly, Tim, 2009b, "Gov 2.0: The Promise Of Innovation", Forbes.com, 10 August, <http://www.forbes.com/2009/08/10/government-internet-software-technology-breakthroughs-oreilly.html>, accessed: 10 June 2011.

Ortega, Felipe and Jesús González-Barahona , 2007, *Quantitative Analysis of the Wikipedia Community of Users*, paper presented at WikiSym'07, 21-3 October, Montreal, Quebec.

Poster, Mark, 1995, "The net as a public sphere?", *Wired*, November,

[http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/3.11/poster.if\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/3.11/poster.if_pr.html)

McLuhan, Marshall, 1964, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw Hill, New York.

Mendonça, David, Theresa Jefferson and John Harrald , 2007, "Emergent interoperability: Collaborative adhocracies and mix and match technologies in emergency management", *Communications of the ACM*, 50(3):44-9.

Mill, John, 2009, *On Liberty*, [http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john\\_stuart/m645o/](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john_stuart/m645o/)

OECD, 2009, *Rethinking e-Government Services : User-Centred Approaches*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Paris.

Rouke, Francis and Paul Schulman, 1989, "Adhocracy in policy development", *The Social Science Journal*, 26(2):131-42.

Salvatore, Armando, 2007, The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Schroth, Christoph and Till Janner , 2007, "Web 2.0 and SOA: Converging concepts enabling the internet of services, *IT Pro*, May/June, 36-41.

Sharkey, Clay, 2008, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organising without Organisations*, Allen Lane, London.

Singhal, Amit, 2011, "Microsoft's Bing uses Google search results-and denies it", *The Official Google Blog*, 1 February,

<http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2011/02/microsofts-bing-uses-google-search.html>,

accessed: 20 June 2011.

Snell, Rick, 2002, "Freedom of Information and the delivery of diminishing returns or how spin doctors and journalists have mistreated a volatile reform", *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs*, 3(2):187-207.

Sterling, Greg, 2007, "Happy birthday, Flickr,: Web 2.0 pioneer turns three", *search engine land*, 27 February, <http://searchengineland.com/happy-birthday-flickr-web-20-pioneer-turns-three-10620>, accessed: 16 June 2011.

Sunstein, Cass, 1993, "On analogical reasoning", *Harvard Law Review*, 106(3):741-91.

Tanner, Lindsay, 1999, *Open Australia*, Pluto Press, Annandale.

Tate, Ryan, 2010, "Steve Jobs Offers World 'Freedom From Porn'", *Gawker*, 15 May, <http://gawker.com/5539717/steve-jobs-offers-world-freedom-from-porn>, accessed: 10 June 2011.

Ubayasiri, Kasun, 2006, "Internet and the public sphere: A glimpse of YouTube", *ejournalist*, 6(2), [http://ejournalist.com.au/ejournalist\\_v6n2.php](http://ejournalist.com.au/ejournalist_v6n2.php)

United Nations, 2005, *UN Global E-government Readiness Report 2005 : From E-government to E-inclusion* , Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Public Administration and Development Management , United Nations , New York.

Wilkinson, Dennis and Bernardo Huberman, 2007, *Cooperation and Quality in Wikipedia*, paper presented at WikiSym'07, 21-3 October, Montreal, Quebec.

Zittrain, Jonathan, 2007, *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It*, Yale University Press, New Haven.