

PART I

Chapter 5

Leveraging New Technologies and the Participative Web

The rapid emergence of the “participative web” (also known as Web 2.0 or read/write web) is reflected in the exponential proliferation of wikis, blogs and social bookmarking. The tools and practices of the participative web can help improve policy making and service delivery by enriching government interactions with external stakeholders and enhancing internal knowledge management. This chapter reviews initial attempts by government to leverage the participative web and outlines some of the challenges ahead.

“Web 2.0 platforms that allow bottom up, social and user generated content could help to promote participation, inclusion and a sense of belonging to the community.”

– Leda Guidi, Department of Communication and Information,
Municipality of Bologna, Italy¹

What are the benefits of the participative web?

Wikis, blogs and social bookmarking are just some of the platforms and tools that are profoundly changing the face of the web. The scale of the phenomenon is impressive and while Wikipedia, YouTube, Second Life, Flickr, Twitter and Facebook are rapidly becoming household names, the adoption of these platforms within the public administration is far slower.² The defining feature of what many are calling the participative web (also known as Web 2.0 or read/write web) is the ability of users to create, share and link content as they develop communities. A recent OECD report on *Participative Web and User-Created Content: Web 2.0, Wikis and Social Networking* (OECD, 2007) offers the following definition of the concept and its implications:

The “participative web”... is based on intelligent web services and new Internet-based software applications that enable users to collaborate and contribute to developing, extending, rating, commenting on and distributing digital content and developing and customising Internet applications... New web software tools enable commercial and non-commercial service providers to draw on... the “collective intelligence” of Internet users, to use information on the web in the form of data, metadata and user resources, and to create links between them.

(OECD, 2007).

The technical underpinning of these new, user-friendly online tools lies in the shift from the use of HTML³ programming language to produce classic “read only” websites to the use of XML⁴ which allows users to readily create, edit, link and share web-based content.⁵

Many commentators have extolled the virtues of collaborative networks for value creation in the private sector (Tapscott and Williams, 2006; Brafman and Beckstrom, 2006; Surowiecki, 2004). Fewer have examined their applicability to the public sector in any depth (Leadbeater, 2008; Johnston and Stewart-Weeks, 2007). This is surprising given that there is arguably a closer “fit” between the basic values of “altruistic” collaboration towards a shared goal and those underpinning the public service.

Three main benefits of participative web approaches for public policy making and service delivery can be identified:

- **Efficiency:** Turning the many separate strands of bilateral “traffic” between individual citizens and government into a public information resource can help reduce administrative burdens for both the administration and the citizen (e.g. www.fixmystreet.com). For example, by publishing online the results of a specific request filed under access to information legislation, citizens (or other actors) can avoid

having to file a new request and governments can avoid the burden of having to respond to identical requests in the future (e.g. single service counter and Automatic Distribution System for petitions offered by the Ombudsman of Korea www.epeople.go.kr). Such an approach could offer significant benefits for all non-personal data transactions.

- **Innovation:** Online collaborative tools, such as wikis and data-sharing sites,⁶ allow asynchronous collaboration with actors inside and outside government (e.g. wiki.participation.e.govt.nz/wiki). They can be used to pool knowledge and ideas but can also harness the power of tagging, ranking, data visualisation and state-of-the-art search engines to sort through information, analyse data, establish priorities and develop recommendations.
- **Accountability:** The symbolic power of government seeking to develop policy on an online “public space” is itself an important asset in establishing public trust. So is the level of accountability exacted by online “reputation managers” where all participants are rated on, and held accountable for, their comments and submissions (for a private sector example see the LinkedIn answers service www.linkedin.com) Actors external to government are beginning to develop online tools for linking publicly available information in innovative ways and with geospatial information (e.g. local service delivery using Google Maps) (e.g. MapLight.org which links campaign contributions and legislators’ votes www.maplight.org).

Box 5.1. Ministerial meeting charts the course towards an open and inclusive Internet economy

The 2008 *Seoul Declaration for the Future of the Internet Economy*, issued by Ministers from both OECD and non-OECD member countries at the OECD Ministerial meeting on the Future of the Internet Economy (17-18 June 2008), underlines the potential of the Internet, and related information and communication technologies (ICT), to improve citizens’ quality of life. Including by “Enabling new forms of civic engagement and participation that promote diversity of opinions and enhance transparency, accountability, privacy and trust”.

Ministers pledged to adopt policies that would foster creativity in the development and use of the Internet including policies that “Encourage new collaborative Internet-based models and social networks for the creation, distribution and use of digital content that fully recognise the rights of creators and the interests of users”. They underlined the need to ensure inclusion through policies that “Recognise the potential of the Internet and related technologies to provide enhanced services to people with disabilities and special needs”. In a similar vein, they agreed to pursue policies that “Promote the use of Internet and related ICT networks by all communities as well as the creation of local content and multi-language translations to improve economic and social inclusion of people with different capabilities, education, and skills, and to preserve cultural and linguistic diversity”.

(For more information, see: www.oecd.org/FutureInternet.)

How can the participative web improve policy making and service delivery?⁷

The business of government is inherently “information rich” and an increasing proportion of public services are in part, or wholly, processed and delivered online. As a

consequence, any Internet-enabled platform that fosters enhanced efficiency and collaboration will have a significant impact on government's ability to co-ordinate and deliver effective public services. In addition to this impact on internal efficiency, participative web tools can be deployed externally at the interface with end-users and citizens in order to leverage their inputs when designing and, in some cases, even co-delivering public services.

The tools and practices of the participative web can help make both online and face-to-face public participation more open and inclusive. They are transforming three factors which contribute to successful policy making and service delivery:

- **Knowledge** which flows freely with the move from an “economy of scarcity” to an “economy of surplus”.
- **Connections** which no longer binary, private and hierarchical but multiple, public and networked.
- **Actors** who are not just isolated “atoms” but are embedded in a dense network of loose links with many others.

Government use of the participative web will enhance its external relations with stakeholders. These developments have several important implications for policy making and service delivery by government as they interact with citizens, businesses and civil society organisations:

- **Government is just one of the nodes in the network** – albeit a large one which is well endowed and highly connected. It is obliged to struggle for the attention of those online, prove its relevance and add value in the same way as any other node.
- **People can be connected even if they are not on the Internet** – if they are offline, they may enjoy strong connections with others who are also offline. Membership of emerging virtual communities hardly discounts the importance of traditional communities.
- **People might be indirectly connected to Internet via others** – who are already online (e.g. granddaughters, radio journalists, frontline public service providers) who therefore provide a “conduit” for the two-way flow of information. You do not have to be online yourself to harness the benefits of the Internet if you know, and trust, someone who is.
- **People may be highly connected online and have little or no connection with government** – bypassing it altogether except for those moments of obligatory contact (e.g. registering births, deaths, paying taxes).
- **People will use their connections to share, compare and verify** – before placing their trust in the information and services provided by a given node (including government).

Government use of the participative web can also improve its internal capacities for knowledge management. Another use of participative web tools, of equally profound potential impact, is that within and across public sector organisations. Applications such as file sharing platforms and intranet-hosted wikis offer significant efficiency gains and huge potential for knowledge management and innovation within the public administration. As witnessed in such platforms as “Diplopedia” and “Intellipedia” in the US (see Box 5.4) some OECD countries are already beginning to actively explore these tools. While not accessible to the outside world, such platforms can provide efficiency gains that may, in turn, translate into better policy making and service delivery to external stakeholders and users.

Box 5.2. UK: Leveraging the web for a “national conversation”

When he became Prime Minister in 2007, Gordon Brown promised to start a “national conversation” on a new constitutional settlement for Britain. But can a nation hold a conversation with itself? And how could the Internet be used to facilitate such a thing? In early 2008, upon the initiative of Michael Wills, the Minister of State at the Department of Justice, these questions were explored in the “Networking Democracy” experiment run by openDemocracy (www.opendemocracy.net/networking-democracy). This aimed not only to discuss the problems and requirements of online conversations, but also experiment with the way these conversations occur.

The conclusions were mixed. While most professionals in online participation were keen to explore the potential of the medium, they were skeptical about anything as concrete as a “national conversation” emerging. They emphasised that the Internet reduces the cost of communication, but does not eliminate the need to communicate. When people contribute to an online platform, a person at the other end is still required to read their comment and interpret what it means – a computer cannot (yet) do this. Scaling that up to a national level would require a significant commitment of time and resources. But as the conversation was opened up to more general participation, the potential of the web to disseminate conversation rapidly, through the “viral” spread of ideas, became apparent. The original ideas and discussions were distributed quickly to other interested parties all over the world, all of whom were able to have their say.

This initiative made it clear that national conversations do not – cannot – take place in one, all encompassing national forum. But they could, perhaps, take place in the multitude of smaller ones that spring up – in Facebook groups, blogs, forums set up for dedicated discussion of one topic or another. If people have trust in the system to listen, then this spread of participation can be swift and intoxicating. It is this potential that was glimpsed, if only slightly, by the Networking Democracy experiment. And it was clear that to be reached it has to invite people into a process that reaches a real outcome and it is not just a consultation that can be ignored.

A web-based national conversation, while relatively inexpensive in terms of previous media, as measured by the cost of involving a single individual, nonetheless remains costly overall. To involve people it needs to set out: a) its aims and objectives clearly; b) how people’s contributions will be read and assessed and moderated and then aggregated; c) how there will then be a chance for participants to respond; d) how the outcome will then be reached.

(For more information, see: www.opendemocracy.net.)

Box 5.3. France: Engaging users in designing online services

In 2004, the Service for the Development of Electronic Government (SDAE – Le Service du Développement de l’Administration Electronique) of the General Directorate for State Modernisation (DGME – Direction Générale de la Modernisation de l’État) established a Users/Citizens network. This network is mainly, but not solely, composed of associations and includes representatives for several issue areas related to access: family, rural areas, seniors, consumers, mediators, exclusion, disability, job seekers, etc. This network has four main objectives:

- To associate its members with e-government projects that have an impact on citizens’ lives through information and communication actions.
- To support the participation of user representatives in experiments such as online address changes, “my public service”, public service contacts, the launch of a new service “Life changes” on the public service portal www.service-public.fr.
- To provide for exchange of information on innovative projects undertaken by the various members.
- To stimulate discussion on issues of common concern for all actors (e.g. e-government for all, innovative solutions for e-inclusion).

Several tools are used to support this network: general information meetings on e-government projects, specific working groups on issues of access, participation in studies and pilot projects of new services, priority e-mail news alerts, calls for comments.

(For more information, see: www.modernisation.gouv.fr.)

Box 5.4. US: Intellipedia and Diplopedia

Participative web platforms can enhance the performance of public sector organisations even when they are not open to the public. Since April 2006, the USA intelligence community has been using Intellipedia, a secure wiki that allows intelligence officers to better share and pool their knowledge. Reports suggest that while early take-up was slow, it is now widely used within and across intelligence agencies. Meanwhile, the US State Department has established its own internal online encyclopedia, called Diplopedia, and has witnessed the proliferation of a host of internal blogs on a wide range of issues of relevance to their mission. The use of online collaborative tools has helped foster communities of interest among State Department employees posted all over the globe.

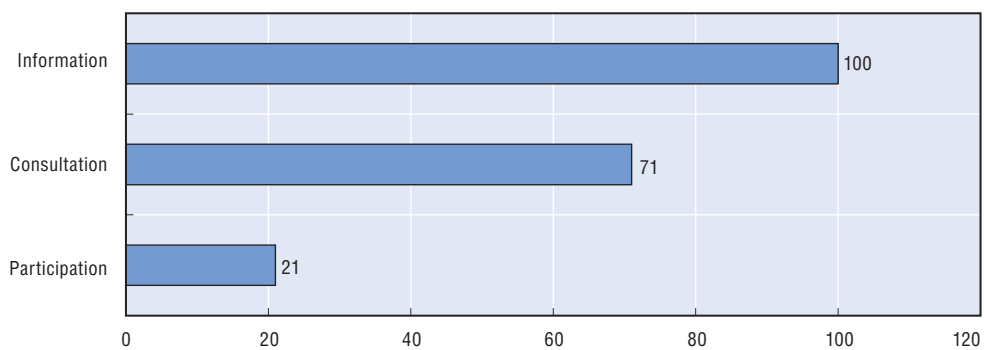
Source: Miller J. (2006) and Bain B. (2007). Online versions accessed 28 August 2008.

Are governments using the participative web?

“The Internet is the tool of choice for OECD member countries in providing citizens with access to government information anytime, anywhere” (OECD, 2001a). Many years after the first OECD questionnaire on the use of ICT in strengthening government-citizen relations in 2000, this finding holds true today. All respondents to the 2007 questionnaire indicated that their priority in the use of ICT is for the provision of information.

Today, close to three-quarters (71%) indicated that online consultation is also a priority. This represents a far larger share with respect to the beginning of the decade and is reflected in the multitude of country experiences with online consultation on draft policy, plans, programmes and legislation (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1. **OECD governments use ICT to inform more than to engage people**
(% respondents, n = 25 countries)



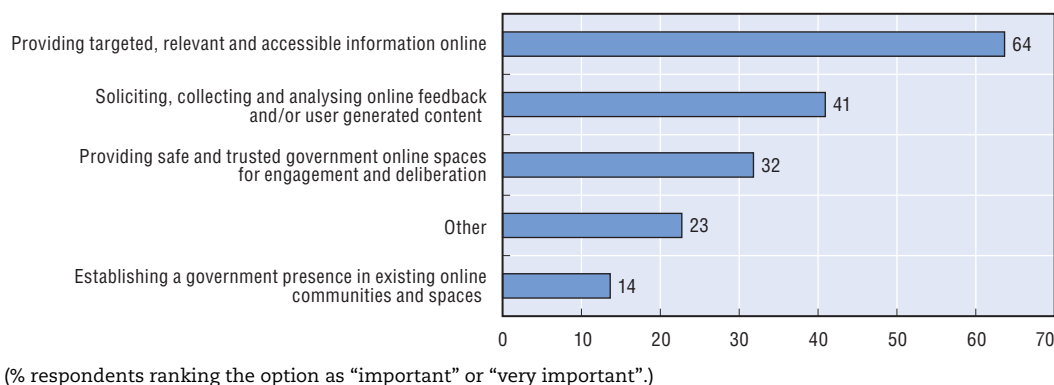
(% respondents ranking the option as “important” or “very important”.)

What is more striking, and far less encouraging, is that another finding from the 2001 report appears to be equally valid today, namely: “Governments use of ICTs to actively engage citizens in policy-making is extremely limited in all OECD member countries at the national level” (OECD, 2001a). Indeed, only 21% of the respondents indicated that using ICT to foster public participation in policy making is a priority.

It may well be that this finding *may* be about to change with the current explosion of interest in – and initial tentative use of – “participative web” tools and platforms. Indeed,

respondents to the 2007 questionnaire indicate that they are beginning to explore some of the new “participative web” options available to them. Given the aggregate nature of these data and the rather large range of tools bundled under each option offered by the questionnaire, these results should be taken as indicative only and handled with due caution. What the results do show is that more fine-tuned investigation into the actual use and perceived success rate for government use of each of these tools (e.g. RSS feeds, wikis, SecondLife) is clearly needed.

Figure 5.2. **OECD governments are exploring new online options to inform and engage citizens (% respondents, n = 25 countries)**



Close to two-thirds of respondents (64%) reported that they are providing targeted, relevant and accessible information (e.g. RSS feeds, e-mail alerts, blogs, podcasts, search engines, interactive games, viral videos, multilingual sites, websites meeting W3C accessibility standards). Of the respondents, 41% say they are soliciting, collecting and analysing online feedback and/or user generated content (e.g. online reputation managers,

Box 5.5. **OECD: Designing and launching Wikigender**

Wikigender (www.wikigender.org) is a public wiki that was officially launched by the OECD Development Centre on 7 March 2008 on the occasion of International Women’s Day. Drawing upon the work of the OECD Gender, Institutions and Development Data Base, this wiki aims to facilitate knowledge exchange on gender-related issues around the world and to highlight the importance of social institutions such as norms, traditions and cultural practices that impact on gender equality.

With its “two-layer approach”, Wikigender distinguishes official data from information that is provided by ordinary users. “Official source” pages are only open to Wikigender partners, but not the general public. Pages highlighted as an “Official OECD Page”, for example, contain verified OECD content and are consequently protected from unauthorised modifications. All other Wikigender content can be freely accessed, edited and supplemented by any user with access to Internet.

The main goal remains that of developing a user-friendly platform to reach out to new communities who are willing to share and discuss their knowledge online. In this respect, Wikigender also serves as a pilot project for the OECD Global Project on Measuring the Progress of Societies (www.oecd.org/oecdworldforum.)

use of ratings, wikis, blogs, etc.). Close to a third (32%) are providing safe and trusted online spaces for engagement and deliberation (e.g. shared workspaces, wikis, simulations, interactive games, online discussion groups). Only 14% reported establishing a government presence in existing online communities and spaces (e.g. MySpace, SecondLife, popular blogs). Close to a quarter (23%) mention other strategies and tools including: portals (Canada), online consultation on draft laws and regulations (Norway), focus groups and user testing of new online services (France).

These fast-paced developments in online platforms and practice require us to update our conceptual “map” of the interactions which take place during policy making and service delivery – and which go beyond the increasingly porous boundary between online and “offline” participation.

Box 5.6. Portugal: Using a social network site to engage with citizens abroad

In early 2008 COTEC Portugal, under the High Patronage of the President of the Republic, launched the first edition of the Prize for Innovatory Entrepreneurship in the Portuguese Diaspora. As part of the media campaign to raise awareness of the prize, President Anibal Cavaco Silva joined the StarTracker (www.thestartracker.com) a popular invitation-only social network site for Portuguese citizens abroad. As a member, he used one of the special functions of the network (a “star power”) that allows members to make a wish that they would like to fulfill with help of other network members. President Cavaco Silva asked other StarTrackers to identify potential candidates for the diaspora entrepreneurship prize. Immediately after this request was launched, a number of network members addressed messages to the President welcoming his initiative, several hundred asked him to become a member of their personal network. In just over a month, 65 candidatures for the prize were collected, of which 14 came via StarTracker, some of them with a great track record. As follow up, the President thanked all members for their messages, their efforts and the results. Finally, online contact gave rise to direct contact when, in July 2008, the President gave the closing speech at a Star Tracker meeting in Lisbon, attended by over 800 network members living in Portugal and abroad.

The diaspora entrepreneurship prize was seen as an ideal theme for the President to explore these new channels, because he approached members with a specific cause and mobilised members to take concrete action in identifying candidates. Based on feedback from members of StarTracker, the President’s initiative was highly appreciated as an attempt to engage with people for whom government institutions are remote – both literally (as expatriates) and figuratively. Using new channels also raises new challenges. For example, the tone in the conversation (which is less formal and more personal), what it means to be part of a network (the President received hundreds of requests to be part of personal networks, to which he responded positively) and how to maintain the conversation over time. What this example does demonstrate is that new participatory web platforms can be part of a strategy to constructively engage citizens living abroad with their home country and thereby reap the benefits of a more global and mobile world.

(For more information, see: www.cotec.pt/diaspora.)

Box 5.7. New Zealand: The ParticipatioNZ Wiki

Participative web platforms can be used to engage a wider range of expertise and experience in drafting government policy. In 2007, the State Services Commission (SSC) of New Zealand developed “ParticipationNZ wiki” a password-protected wiki that could be accessed by members of a Participation Community of Practice. This community includes a diverse range of people drawn from academia, government, business and civil society as well as international experts.


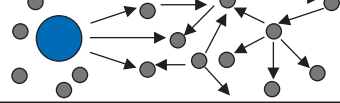

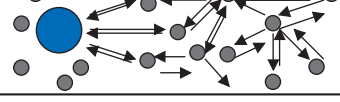

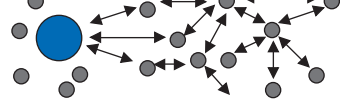
The process of designing and building the ParticipatioNZ wiki started in January 2007 and a beta version was launched on 30 March 2007 (see: <http://wiki.participation.e.govt.nz>). In the course of the following weeks, the SSC project team drafted content for the SSC’s *Guide to Online Participation* directly on the ParticipatioNZ wiki, where members could review it instantly. All members were free to make edits directly on the draft text or to raise issues on the associated discussion pages for each section. All revisions to the guide were transparent thanks to the “history” function of the Mediawiki platform which shows the individual names of who those who make edits, which greatly increased the granularity of who contributed what and when. The draft *Guide to Online Participation* was also discussed at a face-to-face workshop in early May 2007 and a final version released in late 2007. (For more information see: www.e.govt.nz/policy/participation/online-guide-07.pdf and www.e.govt.nz/policy/participation/guide-to-online-participation.html.)

Source: Sommer L., Caddy J. and D. Hume (Part II, this volume).

Are we witnessing a paradigm shift?

Given what we know today about the importance of social networking (both online and offline), what is striking about the image used by the OECD 2001 report *Citizens as Partners* (OECD, 2001) in its definition of information, consultation and active participation is its depiction of a set of isolated individuals each relating to government on a bilateral basis (see Figure 5.3 below). The image is entirely silent about interconnected citizens, and the role of these relationships in shaping how individuals access government-held information, services and decision-making processes. With the advantage of hindsight, the OECD 2001 report could be said to represent a **Participation 1.0 model**.

Figure 5.3. **Shifting paradigms: from Participation 1.0 to Participation 2.0**

	Participation 1.0 model	Tools	Participation 2.0 model	Tools
Information		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-mail alerts • Websites 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RSS feeds • Tag clouds • Podcasts • Webcasts
Consultation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online forms • Online consultation 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blogs • Online polls • Online surveys
Participation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion forums • Shared online workspaces 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-petitions • Mash-ups • Wikis • Tagging • Virtual worlds

Source: State Services Commission of New Zealand (2007), Glossary entry for “Participation 2.0”.

The distinguishing feature of a **Participation 2.0 model** is the presence of networks, flexible connections and transient audiences – akin to David Weinberger’s famous description of the web itself: “small pieces loosely joined” (Weinberger, 2002). Here, government may indeed “push” information out the door via blogs, RSS feeds and webcasts but cannot foresee how other actors will circulate, share, adapt or react to it. It may launch consultations online, but will then witness multiple interactions and exchanges among participants seeking to clarify, promote and substantiate their positions or undermine those of others. Rather than promoting active participation, governments may well be on the receiving end of e-petitions, spectators in collaborative workspaces and consumers of user-generated content.

Box 5.8. UK: FixMyStreet.com

FixMyStreet (www.fixmystreet.com) is a website launched by mysociety.org (see www.mysociety.org) in conjunction with the Young Foundation (www.youngfoundation.org) in February 2007 to help people report to, or discuss local problems (e.g. graffiti, unlit lampposts, abandoned cars) with, their local council by simply locating them on a map. After entering a postcode or location, users are presented with a map of that area. You can view problems already reported in that area, or report ones of your own by clicking on the map at the location of the problem. These reports are then sent to the relevant council by e-mail. The council can then resolve the problem the way they normally would. Alternatively, the website allows users to discuss the problem with others, and then together lobby the council to fix it, or fix it directly themselves.

What are the limits and challenges of leveraging the participative web?

Participative web tools are a means to an end. They do not themselves create social networks – but simply reveal existing ones and facilitate their development. Nor can they solve entrenched problems of co-ordination, conflict or apathy. They can help pool, tag and circulate knowledge thereby breaking down ministerial silos and transforming the bilateral traffic of citizens’ exchanges with government into a common resource of questions and answers.

Wikis, blogs, multimedia and mash-ups of government information are among the many options available. If not today, OECD governments are likely to be actively exploring, and experimenting with, these new platforms and tools in the near future. In doing so they will need to address a number of challenging issues:

- How do people want to use technologies to interact with government policy making processes and services (e.g. personalised online interfaces, regular e-mail or SMS updates, instant messaging)?
- How can government-held information be accessed, analysed and re-purposed by other actors (e.g. mash-ups of service performance and geospatial data)?
- Will government agencies need to design their own participative web platforms or simply join existing ones (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, SecondLife)?
- How will governments ensure privacy and security on non-proprietary platforms (e.g. citizens’ personal data stored on servers located abroad)?

- How are governments ensuring that young people's experience of participation today whets their appetite for participation tomorrow as citizens of the future?
- What guidance and protections do civil servants need when they use participative web tools in their work?

Today, governments are taking the first, hesitant steps in the use of participative web tools and models to enhance the quality of public policy and services. As they explore the potential and limits of participative web approaches, they will need a steady hand and a clear compass to guide their navigation. A sound set of principles which are “future proof” and commonly agreed can provide such guidance in the face of ever-accelerating social, economic and technological change.

Notes

1. See Part III, this volume.
2. In July 2004, Technorati reports that there were some 3 million blogs in July 2004, a figure which had shot to over 70 million blogs only three years later (Technorati, *The State of the Live Web*, April 2007. See: www.sifry.com/stateoftheliveweb).
3. HTML or “HyperText Markup Language” is the predominant *markup language* for web pages developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C).
4. XML or “eXtensible Markup Language” is an open standard for describing data which enables easy exchange of information between applications and organisations.
5. For a visually compelling account of the potentially far-reaching implications of this technical shift see: “The Machine is Us/ing Us” by Prof. Michael Wesch, Kansas State University on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLIgopyXT_g).
6. For example, data visualisation websites such as IBM's Many Eyes (services.alphaworks.ibm.com/manyeyes/home), freebase (www.freebase.com) and Swivel (www.swivel.com) where the OECD is an official data source.
7. This section draws heavily upon the content provided in the glossary entry for “Participation 2.0” in New Zealand's *Guide to Online Participation*. See State Services Commission of New Zealand (2007).

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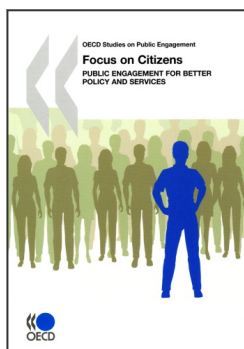
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