

Facing up to Facebook

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Does a failure to embrace online social media mean local government is being left behind in the communication race?

Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, del.icio.us, Digg, Bebo, Ning, YouTube, wikis, Blogger, RSS feeds ... what? International cricketers, musicians, community groups, media outlets, charities, local businesses and even the Australian Prime Minister use social networking sites, but to local government these are mostly foreign or misunderstood tools of communication – so misunderstood, in fact, that many of them are banned to staff. According to Wikipedia (“the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit”); Facebook (300 million users), MySpace (260 million), LinkedIn (50 million) and Twitter (45 million) are amongst the most popular social networking sites in the western world, so should local governments in Australia utilise them? Are they just irrelevant timewasters? Maybe yes, maybe no: it depends on how well you use them, but ignoring them may not be a good strategy.

Whilst IDEa in the UK (www.idea.gov.uk) has won a national e-government award for their development of an online community of practice for local government and the UK's *Local Government Chronicle* (www.lgcplus.com) runs a social media conference, Australia lags behind in the adoption of new social networking interfaces. Local governments, as stewards of liveability for our communities, need to accept that the social networking environment is changing and so are the ways people source their information. No longer can councils sit back and rely on community organisations, newspaper advertisements and stale old websites to communicate with their ratepayers and visitors. Community organisations, once the bastion of social networking and ‘getting ahead’, are losing members in droves; newspaper advertisements can be avoided because articles can be selectively read online; and most local government websites are, well, one-way communication tools that are often navigational nightmares. People's lives are increasingly busy, so having information delivered to their fingertips through more interactive means is where the world is heading.

Social capital, which is the value placed on social networks, is seen as integral to the success of communities and their councils and is often the glue for community resilience and development. The problem is that people are not ‘bumping’ into each other face-to-face as often as they once were. There are fewer repeated interactions to channel information flows, so the simple “Have you heard that the council has this event on?” is not repeated in spoken conversation as often as it might've been a decade ago. It's getting to a point where we're more likely to communicate online with a colleague in another state and whom we've never met in the flesh than to know our neighbour three doors down. It appears that it is easier to service 500 Facebook friends than it is to service the five close friendships that we might have.

Soon-to-be-released data from the 2008 Cradle Coast Young Professionals Network Conference and Summit held in Tasmania (see www.ccypn.org.au) indicates that the number one ‘most attractive’ and the number one ‘most valued’ features of the North West Coast of Tasmania are centred around the nature of the people of the Cradle Coast region. The young professionals attending the summit collectively appreciated the friendliness, family-orientation and strength of the local community when compared to other regional indicators of liveability such as the natural environment (second) and lifestyle (third). Interestingly, the lack of social networking (both face-to-face and online), a sense of isolation and the lack of integration and acceptance of different cultures came in as contrastingly less attractive and less valued features of that region. Although they love the locals, if young professionals are scared off by what they consider to be the locals' attitudes, opinions and unwillingness to accept change and diversity, then the community communication channels are obviously not as effective as they could be. Social infrastructure and networks came in as the number one mechanism to achieve a more desired 2020 future for them. The attraction and retention of young people, especially skilled ones, is an increasingly pressing issue for regional councils, so this information sends a clear signal that all levels of government will need to consider embracing the new forms of social networking, somehow.

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If the nature of social capital is changing in our communities, then online versions of networking may have a role to play for local government. Professor Tom Schuller from the OECD suggests that “[social capital] may be as much about creating appropriate contexts and environments as about direct support for networks”. To put this into context, maybe local government should be funding settings to build social capital rather than directly funding strongly bonded groups, as has been traditionally done. For example, maybe councils could fund a recreation-focused, municipality-specific online discussion space rather than directly funding the local sporting clubs themselves to the levels they have been. If the local sporting club is losing members, it may be a better investment to spend some of the funding allocation on another form of networking that might inspire or re-engage those who now do not have the time to participate face-to-face. Maybe it's the spaces that people connect in rather than the groups of people

themselves that is a key driver to building social capital into the future. These spaces include online spaces. This is not advocating for reduced funding to community groups, but suggesting a rethink on how we fund the networking role that they play.

Many communities in Tasmania have Facebook profiles that are independently run by non-government people. My hometown of Wynyard has a Facebook page (www.Facebook.com/WynyardTasmania) that was started by a community member not linked to the local council. At the time of writing, this site had almost 1000 fans after three months of operation. Not bad for a town of 4000. My old primary school that hasn't existed for 10 years has a Facebook presence that was recently utilised to source old photos for a celebration. There are former boom towns, now ghost towns, on the West Coast of Tasmania that have an online social networking presence that enables former residents to keep in touch and, in some cases, organise events. Interestingly enough, the town of Stanley was recently listed on Facebook as "in a complicated relationship" with Boat Harbour Beach, creating a lot of talk on the street and even making news in the local newspaper. Why wouldn't local government want to tap into networks and promotion like that? One simple posting of an event in on the Wynyard Tasmania page would reach 1000 people in a click, with no advertising cost.

Think of Council1.0 as the council's website that is the repository for meeting agendas, tourism venues and the locations of public amenities whereas Council2.0 is the two-way communication interface where the end-user has the opportunity for input and collaboration and the council can provide 'to the minute' information on its activities.

Local government has grasped Web1.0 technologies. These are static, one-way online communication devices (e.g. the [.gov.au](http://www.gov.au) websites). Councils deservedly claim to be experts in the use of various software platforms for tasks like human resourcing, financial management, rates profiling, council report creation and so on, but most councils present a static website as their service to the online community. Web2.0 is a rapidly increasing form of communication where two-way interaction is enabled, predominantly through the use of online social networking tools. Think of Council1.0 as the council's website that is the repository for meeting agendas, tourism venues and the locations of public amenities whereas Council2.0 is the two-way communication interface where the end-user has the opportunity for input and collaboration and the council can provide 'to the minute' information on its activities.

A 2009 study carried out by ntl:Telewest Business (www.ntltelewestbusiness.co.uk) found that almost half of the UK's local governments used a Twitter account to communicate with their 'twitizens'. The Local Government Association in the UK, the Institute for Local Government in California and even the US Department of State are strong examples of the embracing of Web2.0 platforms while Santa Clarita in the US (www.santa-clarita.com) is a standout example of a local council maximising Web2.0 platforms to engage with its constituents to the point that the Mayor has profiled himself as Mayor Dude (www.mayordude.com). Bill Schrier, Chief Technology Officer for the City of Seattle (www.chiefseattlegeek.com) suggests in his blog that platforms like Twitter maybe powerful tools to communicate emergencies and associated updates to the public. Simon Wakeman

(www.simonwakeman.com), Head of Marketing at Medway Council in South East England, a leader in the use of online social media by local governments, believes that a strategy for the use of these technologies is very important, especially for Facebook. He argues whether people would want to become a Facebook fan of a local council. He suggests that councils should create Facebook profiles for things people are passionate about and reach out to existing Web2.0 users rather than creating a Council X profile. An example of this would be to create an online profile for a community event and then tap into existing Facebook groups that have an interest in this.

If a council was to adopt a Web2.0 approach, the development of a social media strategy is paramount to timesaving, resourcing and the maximisation of community outcomes. Web2.0 social media platforms often have the capacity to be integrated into existing Web1.0 platforms (e.g. the Council's website) allowing information to be shared to make a livelier web presence and a 'one-stop shop'. The bonus is that less training would be needed than that normally required for the content management of Web1.0 interfaces, as many staff members would already be familiar with many of the social media tools. As a lecturer, a student, a musician and an elected local government representative, I utilise a combination of Web1.0 and Web2.0 technologies to present my information and communicate with people online. I have profiles on LinkedIn, Graduate Junction, YouTube, Twitter, Reverbnation, Bebo, Digg, Blogger, iGoogle and Facebook as well as several Facebook musician pages and two static websites. Sound confusing? It's not once you grasp the concept and relevance of each tool and how they can be linked in a vibrant social media suite.

The adoption of Web2.0 tools may also be an additional approach to keeping staff in touch with each other within and between councils. For example, intranets maybe valuable tools but interfaces like wikis are a form of communication where all permitted users can update information collaboratively. This platform can be incorporated into the existing staff intranet and may save the flow of documents being emailed between staff and reduce the paper trail. As the trend for resource-sharing between councils grows, and with potential new rounds of amalgamations ahead, LinkedIn profiles created by staff members themselves may assist with sourcing the appropriately skilled personnel for particular tasks, rather than councils relying on the information collected in their human resources management systems alone.

Grasping Web2.0 technologies is an opportunity for local government in Australia to tap into new networks, strengthen staff communication and increase the level and transparency of community consultation. In doing this, it would join countries like the UK and the US, who are leading the way in developing social media strategies for greater community engagement and greater control over the messages that they wish to send to their ratepayers. Local governments in Australia are encouraged to assess what Web2.0 technologies they may wish to use and for what purpose, and to develop a clear social media strategy that would allocate appropriate delegations of authority, assist with organisational uptake and engage with online communities. I'm not advocating that local governments race out and set up Facebook pages, but the changing environment of how people communicate should be seen as an exciting opportunity to be explored. I look forward to your Tweets, Council2.0.

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