The New South Wales (NSW) Government in Australia has commenced an examination of the use of online social networking technologies to consult with young people and their communities. The primary area of interest has been the use of such technologies to enhance engagement with young people in NSW – mainly 9-18 years of age. This demographic is notoriously difficult to engage with in terms of government policies, social issues and civic matters.

Young people do not generally react positively to messages being pushed at them, or offers to engage with government directly via well crafted web sites. Unless young people are already interested in politics and social matters, they tend to avoid such web sites.

However, new Web 2.0 social networking technologies offer a different mode of engagement and new possibilities for social change. The massive upsurge in social networking sites has seen a new kind of social phenomenon emerge. This comprises a highly focused, self-managed set of micro communities based around networks of “friends”. It reflects and amplifies the youth culture – close connections, instant messages, and high levels of feedback, intimate conversations and group interaction.

MySpace, BeBo, Facebook, Friendster, Twitter and others are examples of accessible, open and instantaneous social technologies being taken up by millions of young people across Australia and across the world. Young people use the technologies to stay in touch
with their friends, to connect to new friends, 
join (and leave) new online micro communities, 
offer ideas, make suggestions, comment on and 
criticise each other.

Strategies to engage with young people utilising these Web 2.0 technologies are of a 
different kind to traditional engagement strategies. While traditional approaches, such as focus 
groups, workshops, surveys and advertising campaigns have a place in youth engagement 
strategies, online social networking strategies open a new era for youth civic engagement. 
We asked the Hon Graham West MP, Minister for Youth in NSW Government at the time of 
interview, about his views on online strategies for government consultation with young people 
and more generally about youth participation in civic matters.

Minister West: I think there are a couple 
of things that are clear, both in relation to our 
current generation of young people but also 
other generations, and that is that government 
structures aren’t very good at engaging with 
young people. They are not really good at 
engaging with them and capturing their ideas 
and feeding back to young people that their 
ideas can actually shape government policy. 
Traditionally youth consultation has been 
done with a number of select people who are 
constantly referred to – that happens at lower 
levels but also at a state level as well. Occasion- 
ally a particular piece of work will require the 
government to call for nominations but even 
then is a very small group of young people 
that responds. Often I think, with the possible 
exception for some highly targeted projects, 
they tend to be a similar type of young people. 
People who are already active and engaged in 
the process, who actually read their local pa-
per and notice that there are applications open 
and that there is this process happening. This 
implies a young person is already engaged. As 
a result, a very small subset of young people 
gets engaged. While their contributions reflect 
some of young people’s views, in a representa-
tive sense we aren’t necessarily capturing the 
depth of young people nor young people from 
diverse backgrounds. I think that particularly 
impacts on disadvantaged young people, but 
there are probably just as many young people 
from a relatively advantaged background, 
privileged background, who are not interested 
in these topics as well. So there are problems 
with our general consultation process.

Some of those criticisms apply to all gov-
ernment consultation processes. But they are 
particularly critical when we talk about young 
pople: they generally do not appreciate the im-
portance of engaging in government processes 
because they cannot see a tangible and direct 
connection to their lives. Youth consultation is 
becoming increasingly more problematic for 
government, I think, and probably as long as we 
continue to go down traditional paths, relying 
on newspapers, focus groups, forums and the 
like, and more young people will continue to 
be disengaged from those traditional processes, 
and the group of people that we are targeting 
would become narrower and narrower. That 
will diminish our ability to get the best ideas 
and best solutions for young people and for the 
wider community.

Question: You mention the disengagement is-
uue... Two opposing views are put forward 
in the literature: some blame youth for 
ignorance and disengagement; others 
blame the government for not being able 
to engage young people. What is your view 
about the (dis)engagement thesis?

Minister West: I think it’s wrong to say 
that young people are not engaged because that 
would imply they are not interested in what 
happens around them and to other people in 
the wider community. That is an unfair criticism 
labelled against youth, but it is probably fair 
to say that they are not necessarily engaged in 
the traditional structures and I am not sure that 
is a new phenomenon. I think that is probably 
something that has been with us for some time – 
Plato complained about the youth of his day.

But the concerning element is that the 
traditional structures which they would have 
gradually progressed into, either through work 
or through education, no longer match the
structures that they are using to communicate and participate in young civic life. I think sometimes the new technologies are actually very well used by young people to communicate but we don’t understand how to interact with them using these technologies and they don’t understand how to interact with the structures of government and bureaucracy. So there is a disconnect here and somehow we have to try to bring them tougher.

**Question:** How? Is there government responsibility?

**Minister West:** The government does have to put a lot more resources and time into actually walking down that path towards young people. I think that’s probably where I am more concerned about engagement. I don’t think young people are tuning in and dropping out, I actually think that they don’t recognise those traditional structures, because they are not being exposed to them. In their schooling they are not being exposed to them, at home they are surrounded with computers and use social networking media to communicate with each other and bring people together which is a form of engagement.

Whereas government structures are still very much based on placing ads in the newspapers and publishing things. Even when we publish them on the internet we publish them on a web page – in a passive way. We are not actually engaging with young people, not in a way that is appealing to them.

**Question:** What about young people’s view of engagement?

**Minister West:** I think this generation is probably more optimistic about their ability to influence change of policies. I just don’t think that they necessarily see government as relevant to those outcomes, especially probably state government. The example I would like to think about is the environment which constantly shows up. I grew up worrying about the nuclear war, it was in the newspaper, literature and something that we learnt about in school and there was nothing we could do about it. Whereas if you look at current times, young people feel far more empowered to actually make changes in this regard. It is very hard as a young person to reduce the stock pile of weapons but it is much easier as a young person to engage and be active in coalitions around particular environmental outcomes. So in some ways they are probably more engaged with some of those bigger issues.

**Question:** There is a lot of rhetoric about youth consultation and youth engagement. How would you define them, do they differ?

**Minister West:** Consultation is different from engagement. We often consult, engaging is much more difficult. Consulting doesn’t necessarily mean that you take on board the views that are put there or give them the same weight as others. Actually engaging with them means that you accept that their views are valid although possibly not as fully formed as they could be and therefore you engage them in a process to refine the ideas, both ideas that you have and ideas that they have, and in the end arrive at a better place than possibly where you both started. It is a partnership, whereas a consultation can be very one sided. With no engagement there is no democracy.

**Question:** How to engage young people? -- is the key question. You mentioned young peoples’ immersion in the Internet and their engagement via social network technologies. What are the opportunities in your view for these technologies to increase participation and engagement of young people in civic affairs?

**Minister West:** I think there is an enormous potential if it is used correctly. It’s important to seek engagement via social networking because it’s where the young people are. If we really aim to engage with young people then inviting them to a dusty hall is not going to be as effective as
going to where they are. If young people are using these online communities and discussing wider issues – whatever the broad thing they signed up for – then that’s where the young people are, it’s where they act. Then it will naturally make sense for government from a resource allocation perspective to actually reach young people and talk to them there.

There are enormous difficulties around that, of course, partly because bureaucracies are not designed for that free flow of information. They rely on a control structure which is good at bookkeeping, and they are very process orientated which has its strengths – it is very good for administrative purposes but not necessarily good for innovation. In a public policy setting, if young people are voicing their views on public policy as opposed to just passively consuming information then who is responsible for engaging them? When policy decisions are quite complex up the chain this complexity makes it very difficult to fit engagement in. The other thing is if young people are using social networking for engagement then we actually need to have people in the government engaging in the process. This has resourcing implications but also means that we need to make a genuine commitment to it. So I think there are enormous opportunities there because that’s where the young people are. We haven’t quite understood how to deal with these, and how to present ourselves to young people in these spaces as a genuine partner.

**Question:** the government needs to change in order to be able to reach young people?

**Minister West:** Yes it does and that’s part of the project I initiated – to try to understand how we might engage with young people in the online space. But if we are doing genuine engagement then we have to be clear about what we can and cannot do. We need to be actually working with young people to understand where the boundaries are so we don’t get that expectation gap and if we can close that expectation gap then we will get a process that hopefully benefits both us and these young people. So there is a huge opportunity for enhancing youth engagement but I am not sure that we really know how to do it yet. However, if this is a long term social trend that people are using these technologies in this way then it will only be a matter of time before the next generation of politicians will come from the Internet generation anyway and these things will evolve...

But I don’t think we can afford to wait for that long. We need to start engaging with young people now, especially if we actually engage with them and get them engaged in the political process then that gives us a broader depth of people that will actually end up being the administrators of the state of the commonwealth of the future. So it’s a good project for democracy.

**Question:** In order to explore and test the use of online social networking technologies, you commissioned a pilot research project “Youth Online Consultation in the ‘Better Futures’ Program” (Dec. 2008 – May 2009). The project examined the adoption of online social networking technologies to engage young people, aged 9-18, in making decisions about expenditure in the “Better Futures” program in their local areas (the Central Coast and North Coast of NSW, Australia). The ‘Better Futures’ program funds youth projects up to $30,000 each, throughout NSW. Young people were asked about the type of projects they would like the money to be invested in. During the online campaign of 9 weeks in the two regions more than 8,000 young people joined the online community created by the research team, and a little more than 2,000 ‘voted’ on suggested list of projects to be funded in their local area. How do you assess the results of the research pilot?

**Minister West:** The pilot project was important for a number of reasons. One is that we, the government, need to get to learn about the social networking spaces. But also part of the principle was that if this is youth money
which the ‘Better Futures’ money is, then surely it makes sense that young people help decide, or in some cases completely decide, where the money is spent. A traditional consultation process has been very difficult in the past. But new technologies allow us to actually start down a new path. 2,000 people voting is a lot more people than we would ever get in a traditional consultation process. What it does mean is that we are actually getting young people decide where the money is going; they know best where the money will make a difference to young people’s lives. So, that helps reach objectives of the ‘Better Futures’ program. It also gets young people engaged in government. The next stage will be to go beyond the voting and engage young people in allocating the money. It might therefore allow us to start a dialogue on other issues and build up to a genuine engagement process.

That is not a universal view I discovered. I think it’s important to recognize that it does pose some concern for people in the sector because potentially it means services that had used a traditional funding model may not get the funding. Obviously when you are dealing with some severely disadvantaged groups that may not access such technologies you would not necessarily use that technology. But where we are talking about general youth engagement, the democratic potential of the use of these technologies is undeniable.

Question: What did you find particularly interesting and valuable in this pilot project?

Minister West: It was interesting that all the suggestions originally were that putting website or a Facebook page up was a waste of time. But the way it was done in the project – video clips of young people talking about youth projects posted on the website and YouTube – shows that when the dialogue is youth-led young people get attracted and engaged. But it was also interesting that geographic location matters, young people were talking about the issues that were of important in their locality.

So that says that local geography and areas of connection are still very important. That is actually quite valuable for us to find. We intuitively have known that you can’t treat all young people generically. The project demonstrated the specific needs of people that we need to address. This is important for some other policy areas. It means that some areas you need to lift aspirations and in some other areas you will have to meet aspirations. I found that quite interesting.

Question: What are you going to do next? How would you develop the idea on online youth consultation and engagement further?

Minister West: Obviously we need to report back to the young people who voted on the outcomes of the voting. The next stage is to start actually spending some of this money. I would like to see a process where young people get involved further in developing these projects ... we are just not that far advanced at the moment. If we can get young people engaged further around those projects, this would show that it was a genuine process. It would also further buy-in into government and start establishing some of those trusts.

If we simply have it as a voting on spending money for the next 10 years then it’s something that you can log on and do once a year to make sure that your favourite things get funded. But we want more than that. If we can then demonstrate to young people that it’s a genuine engagement process and a genuine dialogue around issues that matter to them, it will mean that we are actually practicing new interactive forms of civic engagement. It opens unprecedented opportunities government—young citizens dialogue. It will allow us to be responsive to many concerns as they emerge, rather than react once they become a problem.

Question: How can the government progress along the paths of interactive forms of civic engagement? What are key questions that you will ask researchers to explore?
Minister West: The question is how far can you take this technology really? We have seen how we can engage young people to propose, vote for and rank ideas based on which government will allocate some spending. But how can we take this further? How can we transform it into a form of civic engagement? Can this be used for participatory budgeting? Is it something that we can actually use to help determine social policy? I don’t think we understand how this can be done and what the implications will be.

I think there also has to be a limit. Every form of technology and every form of communication has limits. I am not sure we understand what those limits are. One of the things is that they are not designed to actually replace face-to-face interaction. Which I don’t think is widely understood. Also geography is very important, so therefore how much weighting do you give these types of social networking tools and what other tools do you add into the mix when you try to develop a policy? Is this useful for getting general themes and indicators but possibly not the right tool for getting detailed policy positions? Or is it a tool where you can actually get detailed policy positions? Is it a good tool for spending on specific projects or is it something that we actually adopt for participatory budgeting? I really am not sure and my gut feel is that there will be limits. We are in a representative democracy which means that we accept that it is not always possible to get everyone to participate in. The same limits apply here, we can take it up to a certain level then we need experts, we need research to help us answer these questions. I suppose we would like to know what we can do with it and what we can’t. And what are our needs that current technologies cannot meet.

Question: One such issue is how do you engage a very large number of participants in any debate?

Minister West: Yes, I noticed concern from various elements of government, about facilitation and moderation of online debates. How much moderation is needed? I suppose this is the question of trust. Online debates may be very hard to focus, they may get sidetracked and hijacked, and they might end up being far wider and diffused than originally intended. There are also concerns about who controls the debate. When we know that the bureaucratic structure has been designed as a control administration function then such a question makes sense. From this perspective it is very hard to understand that an online community is self regulating and that online debates emerge as organic structures ... But this does not mean that there are no rules. If a debate has an objective it needs to be moderated to converge towards meeting its objective. There should be a regulating role as part of its organic evolution. There should be limits put on community but the community itself defines those limits. If those limits are pushed too far, the community will stop engaging. Even from brief discussion we can see that it is a very difficult concept of democracy that suggests that our bureaucracy cannot stay unchanged. With the growing of the ‘Internet generation’ it is hard to imagine governments and politics remaining as they used to be.

With this note our time was up and the Minister, Hon Graham West had to rush to his government session. We thanked him for sharing with us and the readers his insights and his visions.

Interview conducted May 7, 2009, by

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Mary Anne Kennan, CSU, Australia
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ENDNOTE

The research was conducted by the University of NSW in conjunction with Small World Social, an expert group in social media and online networking campaigns. The report from the project is available from http://unsworks.unsw.edu.au/vital/access/services/Download/unsworks:4562/SOURCE01?view=true
Dubravka Cecez-Kecmanovic is Professor of Information Systems in the School of Information Systems, Technology and Management in the Australian School of Business at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). Her research has spanned a wide domain from technological design and applications of formal logics in information systems (IS), to studies of social systems of information and government IS, to ethnographies of electronically mediated work and electronic collaboration, to exploring social theoretic foundations of IS. She has made a particular contribution to the critical theory approach to IS research. She has published in the top IS journals such as Journal of Information Systems, International Journal of Global Information Technology Management, Information Technology and People, Decision Support Systems, Journal of Information Technology, International Journal of Actor Network Theory and Technological Innovation, and others. Her recent interests include exploration of emancipatory effects of information technologies in organizations and society, e-democracy and youth online engagement.

Mary Anne Kennan is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Information Studies at Charles Sturt University in Australia. Her teaching and research are broadly in the fields of information and communication in the digital environment. Her recent PhD research investigated scholarly communications, open access and institutional repositories. She continues to research in this area while developing new research interests in the broader field of the digital environment, exploring how new opportunities for multidimensional information flows, developing connectedness, social inclusion and participation arise from the interactions between people and technology.

Hon Graham West was elected to the NSW Parliament in February 2001 as the Member for electorate of Campbelltown, NSW, Australia. This area has a population of over 70,000 people and covers urban and rural areas to the South West of the Sydney region. He was appointed as a cabinet Minister in 2007. Mr West is presently the Minister for Juvenile Justice and has at various times held the portfolios of Minister for Youth, Volunteering, Sport and Recreation, Gaming and Racing and the Minister Assisting the Premier on Veteran Affairs. He holds a Bachelor of Commerce from Wollongong University and is an Advanced Fire Fighter with the NSW Rural Fire Service in which he is an active volunteer. He has a continuing interest in community engagement policies, environmental strategies as the local level, and issues concerning indigenous youth, especially in the areas of employment and education.