

Submission to Gov 2.0 Taskforce

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Background

I provide a brief overview of my background because I believe that it might serve as a half-decent potted history of how we have come to this place, grappling with the concept of Gov 2.0.

I have been part of the digital revolution since 1979, as a student in one of the earliest high-school level computing courses.

By the mid eighties I was firmly ensconced in a career as a video editor. This world was revolutionised by the arrival of AVID, a computer system. The ANU imported the second only AVID into Australia and I was brought in to learn how to use it and train others. Interestingly, AVID introduced metadata to the world of video.

Around the same time, I began to use the Internet.

I also stumbled upon a new software program called HyperCard. Its HyperTalk language is the parent of HTML.

Not long after, I started to use a program called Macromind VideoWorks and continued to do after it was renamed "Director". This program is the parent of the ubiquitous Flash program.

All of this led to me joining the pioneer digital firm, Brigalow Digital Publishing as project director. Brigalow, in its short but spectacular life, produced the first multimedia CD ROM and the first government multimedia in Australia.

The company was sent to its perhaps inevitable end largely through its inability to secure a project under the Creative Nation funding.

In 1993, a friend at the ANU invited me in to see a new toy, the Mosaic Web Browser.

My life changed forever.

On the collapse of Brigalow, I started a web development firm, SafetyWeb, which did very well in the boom, servicing government and private clients.

See <http://web.archive.org/web/20000708002224/safetyweb.com.au/client.htm>

I sold SafetyWeb in early February 2000.

See http://www.arnnet.com.au/article/90921/it_channel-eat-channel_world

I sat out the bad years after the dot.com crash and started 108 Digital in 2004.

Since then we have grown to be one of the leading digital agencies in Canberra.

I am about to start work on my top secret “Project Virtually Invisible” which will explore a wider and deeper web than what I am able to do servicing clients.

Submission

Defination

While I understand the need to ‘brand’ the work of the taskforce, I see an immediate problem with the use of “2.0”. As has been widely canvassed on the TF blog, the use of version numbers is troublesome. Generally, the digital industry treats them as a bit of a joke.

Leaving that aside, what is this “2.0” that sits at the top of the taskforce’s work. Of course, it is closely related to Web 2.0 and efforts to distinguish between the two terms need to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

The term ‘web 2.0’, first coined in a technological perspective, was made popular in a prediction by the great [Tim O'Reilly](#) of a post-dot.com crash resurgence in digital companies.

Web 2.0 is the [business revolution](#) in the [computer industry](#) caused by the move to the [Internet](#) as a [platform](#), and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform.

The prediction started to come true soon after and YouTube, FaceBook, etc are premium examples of what Tim was talking about.

The reputable place to define web 2.0 is, of course, Wikipedia.

Within the first section, our great forefather, [Tim Berners-Lee](#), calls the term a “piece of jargon”

It is interesting that, at the time of writing, Wikipedians are debating the idea that entries for Web 1.0, Web 2.0, and Web 3.0 be merged and restructured. This speaks to the futility of dubbing the revolution with version numbers.

See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0

I submit that the matters at hand for the TF are as much about the broader concepts of web 1.0 and web 3.0 and this should be acknowledged going forward and beyond the life of the TF.

Technology

While I respect that many involved in the process underway come from a solid policy background, I have been concerned at some resistance to addressing the technological aspects of the revolution.

It has been suggested that to do so is akin to putting the cart before the horse. I contend that to not do so is akin to organising the goods you want to carry and where you want to go without any consideration of the cart that will carry the goods and get you there.

I have some recent experience in policy as it relates to the digital space.

This experience has confirmed for me that one cannot seriously engage in any policy discussions without understanding the technologies that underpin any policy.

This would be no different to creating trade policy without a good grasp of how trade works, including the machinery (ports, transport, shipping, etc).

Wikipedia has a quality overview of the technology that underpins web 2.0 and it is important for anyone involved to know more about the technology described. It should be understood that a robust community of opinions surrounds such a Wikipedia entry and so the description, blunt as it is in its focus on certain technologies, should be observed very closely.

Wikipedia introduces the technology under the heading “How it works” as such:

The client-side/web browser technologies typically used in Web 2.0 development are Asynchronous JavaScript and XML (Ajax), [Adobe Flash](#), and [Javascript/Ajax frameworks](#) such as [Yahoo! UI Library](#), [Dojo Toolkit](#), [Mootools](#), and [jQuery](#).

I know this sounds all very geeky to the non-technical but we must understand that anyone applying for any position within the web industry, either technical or management, would need to know of these clearly identified technologies. Going forward, it should be the same in the public sector.

All the major web 2.0 properties (YouTube, FaceBook, etc) are possible only because the aforementioned technologies exist.

It also important to understand that such a giant as Twitter was created as a working prototype (public beta) in just two weeks. For government, used to spending lots of time developing IT, the RAD (Rapid Application Development) tools behind web 2.0 are going to bring a lot of pressure to ‘release early and release often’.

I submit that the TF needs to ensure that the clearly identified technology sits at the core of discussions and efforts, alongside and guiding the important and complex policy considerations.

Ideas

Of course, geeks and geek-like thinkers do not sit around manipulating computer code for just the fun of it (although it can be fun). Code gets manipulated because humans come up with ideas about what can be done with it.

These ideas are firmly in the “wouldn’t it be good if ...” world.

The Web 2.0 ideas that have emerged are truly profound:

- People being able to place items for auction and sell to the highest bidder
- People being able to connect with their friends and share all sorts of things including their current activity
- People being able to tell their friends what they are doing in just 140 characters
- People being able to load up their videos to share with anyone else (or just selected individuals)
- People being able to document their trip overseas for their folks back home and also people travelling to the same place at a latter date
- People being able to book vacant rooms in motels at discount prices

Of course, I am describing the ideas/aspirations at the heart of eBay, FaceBook, Twitter, YouTube, TripAdvisor, and LastMinute, respectively.

Collectively, those sites are worth billions of dollars but each started from a pretty straightforward idea and deliver on this extremely well.

The gov 2.0 process should be driven through a lot of “wouldn’t it be good if ...?” thinking.

From this, the framework for policy discussions can begin and I believe that it is truly cart before the horse to try to set the policy (beyond broad starting guidelines) before working out the aspirations.

I submit that the TF use a sizeable portion of the soon to be released funding to support a range of exemplar (beta) projects based on the “wouldn’t it be good” principle.

The TF should ensure that projects are joint efforts between agencies and the digital industry.

Knowledge

Working in the online space can be extremely challenging. It requires you to be on a constant and steep learning curve. You need to be open, indeed inviting, to a complete rethink on everything you think you know.

Of course, to fully comprehend any new thing that challenges your thinking, you also need to know how we got here and where 'here' is.

As mentioned, one needs to be deeply aware of the technology that underpins it all. You must also understand that 'industrial' nature of the web. If you don't know how many servers Google has, then you need to find out. This will stop you glibly asking the geeks to build a Google unless you have the significant budget to do so.

As if this is not enough to contend with, you need to be immersed in the societal changes that are underway and driven by the web. The changes are arguably the most profound and fundamental shift in human history and to understand them in a contemporary sense is a massive challenge. Likely, even historians of the future will find it hard to chart the shifts taking place.

I believe that when future generations come to brand this time in history they will call it the 'knowledge revolution'.

The digital skills required are in increasingly short supply and high demand. The APS is no different and a key challenge for the TF is to begin the process of growing the digital knowledge bank in the APS.

Of course, there are many within the APS with significant skills and passion for the online space. Places as varied as the National Archives and Human Services/CSA are examples of where the TF can find champions, if required.

But these good folks are not enough and, I believe, the APS needs to 'clone' these people across the APS.

There is no doubt that there are many jobs that will become commonplace in the near future that do not exist now. There are jobs already being done (within libraries, for example) that will need to multiply as we move into a more semantic-based web.

So, we have a bunch of people that know a lot about what is going on, and we need to grow more of them, and we have a need to start to identify completely new (and revised) roles.

It will be by increasing the numbers of digital savvy APS people that we will start to answer the questions about roles.

My submission offers one suggestion for how we can start that process of expanding on digital knowledge in the APS. There will most likely be better ways to achieve the same outcome.

Regardless, the outcome needs to be worked on going forward. We need to saturate the APS with digital knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

I submit that the TF propose a pilot program that involves the identification of the digital elite across the APS and, with their agencies support, charge them with the responsibility of identifying candidates for an increased digital role.

These selected individuals should have significant time and resources devoted to the expressed outcome of bringing them up to high-level digital knowledge.

Both the original and 'newbies' should be deployed on an agency-by-agency evangelistic mission to spread the word.

These evangelists should have the backing of a high-level (PM) commitment to the roles they are playing in the APS.

Effort

One thing that we can all be sure of is that this Gov / Web 2.0 thing is going to involve a lot of effort from a lot of people.

I think that most in the digerati would concur that there is very few organisations that have a real handle on how much effort has to go into the web, going forward.

More accurately, most are dismally unaware of the impact that the web is going to have on where they put their effort.

Some of the TF had heard me speak of clients with hundreds of call-centre staff that find it hard to comprehend why they would need one staff member to monitor and be involved in their online forum.

Effort involves funding, training, policy, resources, etc.

The APS does apply significant effort in the web space but I contend that, taken in an overall budget context, it is too small for the challenges/opportunities ahead.

I submit that TF should commission research on the appropriate effort that should be going into the government online effort with specific reference to the emerging web 2.0 and 3.0.

To support the case, the TF should seek to identify all savings that will be achieved and the likely social dividends that will flow from an increased effort.

Summary

I thank the Taskforce for the opportunity to make this submission.

Like many in the digital industry, I am relieved and excited by the work of the TF and the individual efforts that have been put into what is groundbreaking consultation.

I also thank AGIMO for its refreshingly honest and constructive involvement in the conversation.

I especially thank Senator Kate Lundy for her political leadership on this effort. Kate, it's a long way from Brigalow Street in Lyneham and we all have a long way to travel.

The Rudd Labor Government can always count on me to do what I can to help Australia move to a smart, low-carbon, and socially responsible Australia using the greatest invention of all time, the World Wide Web.

There are many like me, some who have been active in the TF blog and I encourage the TF to harness the easily identified digerati both in the APS and outside to shape the future direction of this vital economic, societal, and political revolution.