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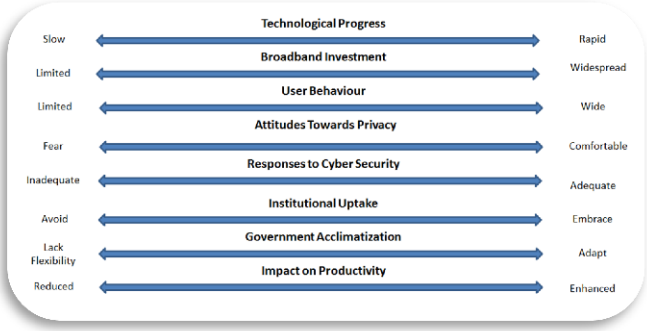
Governing by Wiki

Social Media Foresight Summary

The digital age has arrived with accelerating speed and an expansive reach. Social media, in particular, is causing a fundamental shift in society. It is synonymous with immediacy, pervasiveness, openness, interactivity, connectivity, and transformation, and is challenging our current institutions, processes, behaviours and values. Just imagine what the future holds, as advances in artificial intelligence create greater opportunities for hyper-personalization, as peer production, collaborative consumption and gamification drive the new economy, and as social media shape our institutions and work environment.

Uncertainty Bytes

The continuing evolution of social media depends on the interaction of uncertain factors, each of which could play out in different ways. One of these uncertainties is the pace of technological progress. A second is accessibility to the Internet and the means to reconcile the incongruity between connectivity and isolation. This will partially be determined by strategies towards and investment in broadband infrastructure. User behaviour will also determine the success of social media in the future, which may be influenced by perceived need, evolving preferences, prices and ease of use. Further to this, attitudes towards privacy and the use and abuse of private information will influence user behaviour from both an individual and organizational perspective, as will the adequacy of responses to cyber-security. Finally, the acclimatization to and adaptation of social media technologies in meeting organizational objectives will likely determine its fate in business and government settings, as will its contribution to enhancing or reducing productivity. The manner in which these uncertainties interact to create a limiting or enabling social media environment needs to be thought through as policy responses are being developed.



Through the Looking Glass

The future holds different realities shaped by culture, politics, the environment, the economy and technological progress, resulting in different opportunities and challenges for businesses, government and individuals. These different worlds allow us to visualize the interactions of multiple components in distinctive ways and can help determine where decisions made today could lead. Four plausible social media narratives were designed and explored on a continuum from a declining world to one of profound transformation. While these scenarios are not expected to play out as scripted, they are meant to shed some light on how social media may impact a range of policy domains.

Setting the Policy Stage

The scenarios underpinned by the uncertainties identified above highlight varying implications for policy in terms of balancing potential opportunities and pitfalls:

Wiki Governance

Social media has the potential to transform traditional governance models. Open data, open policy development and crowd-sourcing initiatives all provide a means of enhancing citizen and stakeholder engagement. Governments are trying to determine how these tools can most effectively be used. In doing so, they will need to strike a balance between open citizen engagement, direct decision-making and representative democracy, as well as weigh the need for transparency and mass collaboration with that of accountability and security.

Your access is fairer than mine

Accessibility to the Internet, digital devices and basic software will be some of the many digital issues that governments will have to deal with, especially as online platforms become a key sounding board for citizens to voice their ideas and expression, a personalized portal to access government services and an increasing means of economic necessity and opportunity.

I'm not paranoid, you are!

Balancing between openness, privacy and the protection and propriety of information will be an increasingly important issue for governments in the new wiki world. Governments will need to find the right balance between the implementation of regulations and policies that protect citizens from abuse and protecting freedom of speech and the sharing of ideas.

More earning and learning

The digital literacy of citizens will play an important role in fostering critical thinking in the face of information overload. Governments and learning institutions will both need to keep pace in encouraging citizens to develop these new skills for the workplace. The increasing use of digital games and social media in the learning space could raise accreditation issues related to learning in less formal educational settings.

My avatar is healthy and sane, am I?

Social media have benefits that can be applied exponentially, such as the opportunity for better health care delivery. However they also come with negative social impacts. Emerging health issues such as psychological disorders and Internet addictions, cyber-bullying, degeneration of interpersonal skills, and other potential health implications will need to be examined. Governments will need to consider their role in helping encourage positive benefits and offsetting possible negative consequences of the emerging digital age.

Your car cost how many points?!

Gaming and virtual currencies have the potential to take on a serious role in the economy, with the opportunity for gamers to exchange virtual currencies for real goods. The opportunity may arise to live off online gaming as a full-time or part-time job. Open source tools are altering traditional industries, creating a whole new player: the "prosumer" – one who produces and consumes the same artifact. Examples include Nike who offers consumers the ability to use technology to customize products at the design phase and Apple's apps technology which creates a platform for consumers to produce and profit from their creations. The emerging policy implications (e.g., taxation) of these shifts will be crucial for governments to consider.

Building a virtual bridge

Governments can play a role in proactively developing policies to invest in digital infrastructure to stimulate economic growth and innovation as well as to enhance governance structures. The main challenge is developing a strategy that is flexible and adaptable enough to take into account the rapid pace of technological and cultural change and providing an incentive structure for risk-taking in both business and government contexts.

The Futures are Ours to Build

What will be the next big thing in this digital age? We can only imagine what technological advancements might be coming next, which continue to evolve at a fast and furious pace. But living in the digital age is more than keeping pace with mobile devices, gadgets, and platforms; it is about having the appropriate policy tools for issues arising from this era. While the potential impacts in the next decade and a half are uncertain, we can envision plausible futures, as identified above, that challenge our own assumptions about digital technologies, especially social media, and how they could shape our future.

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