



FORESIGHT STUDY

Governing by Wiki: Fast, Flat, and Furious

What if...

...social media revolutionizes the way the Government of Canada works and interacts with its citizens and other social institutions?

The age of wiki has arrived. How will governments ride the technology wave, capitalizing on the opportunities of open information and mass collaboration on the one hand while being vigilant about the potential challenges on the other?

Increasingly, "netizens", businesses and civil society organizations are embracing the wiki world that enables them to generate, share, and co-create information and knowledge on an ever-widening scale with accelerating speed. Instead of simply orbiting around this fast paced world with a watchful eye, governments around the world, including Canada, are beginning to engage and to be engaged with the public.

This Policy Horizons Canada foresight study aims to:

1. identify the emerging forces that will shape the world of social media and the Internet globally in the coming decade;
2. assess the impact of these forces on the well-being of Canadian society and the competitiveness of its economy; and,
3. analyze the ways in which social media will transform or even revolutionize the way the Government of Canada interacts with its citizens and other institutional actors.

Why is this important?

The emergence of social media changes how information is exchanged, how influence is created, and how services are delivered. It has opened a new channel for engagement, outreach, research, data collection and policy development.

While traditional hierarchy of information and knowledge generation has been flattened, new issues are emerging quickly, putting governments in 'uncharted' territory. At the same time, traditional issues such as security, inclusion, and accessibility have taken on new dimensions in cyber space.

Addressing social media's impact on institutions and individuals, including the impacts on behaviors, norms, values and processes, requires balancing between issues such as openness and privacy, protection and propriety of information, and other considerations.

Points to consider

Will Canada become a world leader in open collaborative governance?

- As a rule, most knowledge lies outside any organization. To harness this capacity, businesses and governments around the globe are looking for partners to provide innovative solutions and implement them. Social media is a tool through which policy-makers and the business community can engage Canadians to create customized products and services.
- Collaborative governance necessitates an evolution of the relationship between the public sector and its partners, causing a shift in roles and responsibilities. Collaborative practices have the potential to generate better results than traditional institutional methods, enabling greater citizen contribution. The role of governments may be to provide a platform in which efforts could be coordinated to address particular problems or opportunities.
- What kinds of emerging institutional structures will be required for effective citizen engagement and participation? How could social media be used to foster innovation within private companies and across sectors?

Will widespread collaboration paralyze governance in the wiki world?

- Opening up to social networks brings non-trivial consequences; savvy marketers are already tapping into this readily available information for their own profits, bringing a whole new distinction between what is private or public. Businesses and governments will have to consider the impact of full disclosure and protection from piracy and infiltration, while at the same time opening up to the world.
- Smartphones and other wireless devices provide a plethora of pathways for sharing information. Information overload may result in its own challenges, such as disrupting focused attention, impeding decision-making, and increasing stress levels. In order to use social media effectively, organizations, including governments, will need to concentrate on specific objectives and establish ground rules to coordinate external input.
- The notion of accountability could take on new meaning under a collaborative governance model. Governments will likely continue to have a large role in priority setting. However, in a democracy where citizens are more engaged, increased involvement in the process may be sought.
- Who will ultimately be accountable for the outcomes of policy decisions? What is the balance between citizen engagement, direct decision-making and representative democracy? How can we weigh the need for transparency and mass collaboration with that of accountability and security?

What are the emerging forces that will shape the landscape of social media globally and in Canada?

- Emerging economies will be expanding the ranks of the global digital population, spurring demand for new platforms, products, and services. These countries may drive the evolution of technology, forcing the developed world to listen to the emerging digital community and adapt accordingly. Nevertheless, we may see a divide between the digital haves and have-nots, both between and within countries. If online platforms become a key sounding board for citizens, how would the voices of those without access be heard?
- In Canada and other developed countries, as baby boomers retire the digital generation will take centre stage in the workplace. Office culture may evolve fast, with an emphasis on working 'wikily'. Working from home and for multiple employers at the same time could become the norm.
- What are the policy opportunities and challenges posed by the ever changing nature of ICT with new devices, connectivity, services and content?

Sources

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