



## **PERSPECTIVES**

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**NEW VOICES 2009**

**NETWORKED**

**OUTCOMES REPORT**

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**The Lowy Institute for International Policy** is an independent international policy think tank based in Sydney, Australia. Its mandate ranges across all the dimensions of international policy debate in Australia – economic, political and strategic – and it is not limited to a particular geographic region. Its two core tasks are to:

- produce distinctive research and fresh policy options for Australia’s international policy and to contribute to the wider international debate.
- promote discussion of Australia’s role in the world by providing an accessible and high quality forum for discussion of Australian international relations through debates, seminars, lectures, dialogues and conferences.

Lowy Institute Perspectives are occasional papers and speeches on international events and policy.

The views expressed in this paper are the author’s own and not those of the Lowy Institute for International Policy.

## **OUTCOMES REPORT**

**‘New Voices 2009’**

*Networked*

**held on**

**Thursday 11 June 2009**

**at the**

**Lowy Institute for International Policy**

**31 Bligh Street, Sydney**

On 11 June 2009, the Lowy Institute for International Policy hosted its sixth annual New Voices conference. The conference forms an important part of the Lowy Institute’s outreach activities to generate dialogue on Australia’s role in the world and international affairs. Since 2003, New Voices has been a platform for early and mid career professionals to offer fresh insights and perspectives on issues such as Australian sovereignty, global challenges and opportunities, the impact of technology on international relations, leadership in the international realm, and new issues of responsibility arising from globalisation. Participants are intentionally drawn from a diverse range of professional backgrounds to create a vibrant and stimulating environment for discussion, as well as to encourage the cross-pollination of approaches and ideas between business, academia, and the public sector.

This year’s conference theme, ‘Networked’, allowed participants to discuss the ways in which network relationships, structures, and technologies affect different parts of our world. This report is an overview of the day’s discussion on four broad themes.

The Lowy Institute would like to thank AusAID for their sponsorship of the New Voices Conference. Without their generous support it would not have been possible to host such a well-subscribed conference. Thanks are also due to the panellists and moderators of the conference for their efforts in directing the day’s discussion and driving such fruitful debate on the key aspects of the conference theme. Lowy intern, Angela Evans, provided much appreciated assistance organising the event and was the principal drafter of this report.

## **NETWORKED GOVERNMENT**

### *Information Networks in Government Policy and Decision-Making*

Producing an effective network structure to facilitate the flow of ideas and decision-making within government is vital for driving success, innovation, and efficiency.

In recent years, government decision-making networks have undergone a gradual, yet nevertheless decisive shift in their form. Incrementally, conventional hierarchical structures have given way to a more organic and free-flowing network, in which ideas are approached as 'rolling issues' to be engaged with sporadically, and discussion circulates up and the down the command chain with unprecedented speed and multi-direction. The shift away from a linear network structure to more of a 'policy maelstrom' presents governments with both new capabilities and challenges.

The flexibility of this new approach to policy-making enables issues to be engaged with in a more frequent and rapid fashion, which tends to result in policy forged directly in response to recent domestic and international developments. While this has the potential to produce more relevant policy, such an approach also runs the risk of creating essentially reactive policy, which reflects erratic day-to-day developments rather than a gradually accumulated corpus of solid knowledge and engagement. It is up to the new generation of employees coming through government agencies to ensure that they create a work culture that achieves a healthy combination of both the 'old' and 'new' approaches.

As well as these developments to internal networks, many governments now find themselves more firmly situated in a complex external web of voices in the policy debate. More than ever, governments must take part in a cross-sectoral and increasingly international exchange of ideas and policy, in which government decisions are inevitably subject to a greater sense of contestability. Rather than viewing this as a threat, governments have much to gain if they can effectively utilise these knowledge networks to incorporate new expertise and different perspectives, resulting in better policy.

### *New Social Media and Interactive Policy*

Even governments Twitter. Social media networks are playing an increasingly prominent role in the way governments communicate with civilian populations. The recent US Presidential election marked a watershed in the use of social media in election campaigns. Obama's use of social media was arguably one of the most decisive factors in determining his election success; allowing him to co-ordinate campaign events, reach a wider body of voters, and garner over 55 million dollars in financial support online. Obama's 800 000 friend-strong MySpace page, frequently updated blogs, YouTube video

messages, and use of Facebook and Twitter formed an astonishingly effective online platform for attracting votes and raising campaign awareness.

Social media use didn't stop with the election, however. The new administration has increased the prominence of 'DipNote' in their public communications approach and Obama's recent speech in Cairo was promoted via web and SMS text message updates. As Generation Y begins to supplant the 'baby boomer' generation as the largest voting group in the US and Australia, the trend towards social media forming a core part of government public communication is unlikely to stop.

Governments are beginning to recognise the enormous potential social media holds for diplomatic engagement with other populations. As well as transcending barriers of time and space, social media networks also offer a means through which foreign governments can communicate with the civilians of other nations. In 2004, then US Ambassador to South Korea, Christopher Hill oversaw the establishment of 'Café USA', an online chat community to promote open and honest dialogue between the US Embassy and young South Koreans. While new social media certainly holds enormous potential for transforming how we conduct international diplomatic engagement, there is still something to be said for 'going the last three feet'. If new social media networks are going to enhance our diplomatic channels, they must function as a complementary addition, and not as a substitute to more personal forms of contact.

This is not to suggest, however, that the interaction made possible through new social media is necessarily impersonal and sterile. In fact, in many respects, new social media permits an interaction between populations and their governments of unprecedented intimacy. Rather than the top-down nature of the policy speech on the soapbox, social media blogs and forums create a space for two-way dialogue, which produces a greater interactive dimension to policy than ever before. The changes to our expectations of policy engagement that these technologies create are not to be underestimated. New social media networks change not only by what means policy is communicated, but the nature of policy interaction itself. In an age of rapidly expanding social media networks, one can't help but ask to what extent network technology is driving policy?

## **NETWORKS AND DEVELOPMENT**

### *Cross-Sectoral Networks and the Development Challenge*

Cross-sectoral initiatives between governments, businesses, and community groups often create effective synergies for fulfilling development projects. But a network isn't enough – a genuine partnership must be forged between these groups if real change is to be seen through.

While the differences in background and expertise of the groups that come into a cross-sectoral partnership often form the very basis for why collaboration proves effective, such differences can result in the parties not necessarily envisaging the same underlying objectives for a project. In Papua New Guinea, an Australian cross-sectoral development initiative confronted such a situation in the rebuilding of local village schools. The prospect of collaboration between an oil company, a government, and village community groups offered a more efficient and cost-effective solution; with the oil company providing transport resources while the community group provided local labour. Yet as well as possessing different skill sets, each of the parties held different views on what the objectives for the project were. Crucial to the eventual success of the project was an overarching and commonly-held vision for the final result.

### *Network Technology and Social Development*

The Nokia 1100 is good news for development. Increasingly widespread access to mobile phone networks within the developing world has created a number of opportunities for individuals to ‘leapfrog’ to computer technology and access a wide range of services to improve their quality of life. Netbanking and telecommunications via mobile phone networks have given people greater financial autonomy than ever before. For example, prior to phone-banking services becoming available, women working in many of the textile factories in the Philippines would be forced to hire taxis to literally transport cash from their wages to their families living in distant villages. Enhanced access to mobile phones and their associated services has brought greater prosperity. Recent studies have shown that a 10% increase in mobile phone use within most developing countries leads to an average 0.6% increase in GDP.

In the developing world, mobile phone networks are also contributing towards improved healthcare. Companies such as Voxiva have developed toll-free information networks for HIV/AIDS patients taking anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs. Voxiva’s TRACnet, amongst other services, sends SMS text messages to remind patients when to take their medication, which has resulted in a radical improvement in the widespread effective use of ARV drugs in Rwanda. Similarly, the Millennium Villages Project has begun complementing face-to-face medical treatment with telemedicine technology, with which difficulties reaching remote populations and staffing shortages can be overcome by a SMS-based diagnostic service.

The increasing availability of mobile phone networks has had implications on democratic political activism. As well as the ability to mobilise large numbers of people at short notice to protest for greater political rights, there have been several reported cases in which the ability to quickly SMS Amnesty International or a similar organisation has arguably saved the lives of arrested activists, and ensured their rights have been upheld. Yet the presence of the right infrastructure and technology is not enough to create, or even facilitate democracy on its own. In many countries, governments of varying legitimacy remain gatekeepers to network access, and have been known to take extreme measures, such as the Sri

Lankan government's outright connectivity ban during the recent phase of the Tamil conflict, to prevent the mobilising potential of mobile phone use.

## **THE NETWORK MYTH: WE CAN ALL CO-OPERATE**

### *Co-operation in Conflict: Networks and the Modern Security Paradigm*

The modern security paradigm can be conceptualised as essentially a 'networked space.' Contemporary threats to international security, such as transnational terrorism, involve extremely well-networked groups, operating through a devolved co-ordination structure with interconnected nodes spanning most of the globe. This has allowed them to effectively harness the new media for propaganda purposes. On the other hand, the official channels and often rigid bureaucracy through which communications must travel within governments creates a time lag in response. A key challenge for governments is how to adapt and use their own networks to confront these highly-networked security threats. The ability for different organisational cultures to effectively co-operate forms a crucial aspect of the required response.

### *Media Blogs: An Even Playing Field, or New Competition?*

The recent emergence of 'the blogosphere' is commonly characterised as a revolutionary phenomenon in mainstream media, radically democratising information communication networks. With the growth of blogging, no longer is the ability to contribute to political media discussion confined to the privileged few affiliated with monolithic media moguls. Instead, at least theoretically, blogging allows anyone with access to the internet to become a writer with the potential to reach a readership of millions via the network of the web.

Yet blogging hasn't provided an egalitarian media sphere as many thought or hoped it would. In many ways, blogging has merely replicated the traditional hierarchical media model online. Rather than an egalitarian space for diverse media dissemination, the blogosphere is dominated by A-list blogs such as The Huffington Post that are receiving millions of visits a day. Their large number of daily visits leads to a higher ranking, which often encourages even more visits, thus placing them in a virtually impenetrable upper echelon of self re-enforcing popularity. The blogosphere is perhaps better viewed as a force for creating a greater equality of opportunities rather than equality in outcomes within the mainstream political media.

Perhaps the most interesting difference between the blogosphere and traditional media is the way in which competition within the network is approached. While paper magazines, in a bid to widen their readership, wish to crush external competitors, bloggers have a strong incentive to *encourage* more blogs.

Through encouraging the establishment of similar blogs, bloggers increase the likelihood of achieving a greater readership and overall ranking because blogs are most commonly ranked according to how many other blogs have linked to their blog. By encouraging competitors, bloggers place themselves in the position of a hub in a far-reaching and interconnected blog network, with the greater number of nodes leading to greater success (at least in ranking terms).

## **NETWORKS 2.0 – THE FUTURE OF NETWORKS**

### *The Future of Business: Socially-Enabled Customer Experience*

It is certainly welcoming to imagine a future where being kept on hold will be a thing of the past. Already, businesses are transforming the way they deliver customer service through the use of social media networks. At least one major Australian company, now on Twitter, allows customers experiencing difficulties with their products to ‘tweet’ their problems and potentially receive assistance faster through online channels.

### *Technology and Social Media Networks: Crime-fighter or Crime-maker?*

The internet and recent developments in communication technology present new challenges to the way our police force addresses crime. Not only do these technological advances enable criminal networks to operate more efficiently and effectively, they also have resulted in the creation of new crimes such as ‘sexting’, phishing, and cyberbullying that must be confronted by police and the legal system. Fortunately, the future is likely to see a police force as tech-savvy as the criminals they are pursuing, with the police force already actively using new social and other electronic media to communicate with the public and tackle criminal networks. Yet regardless of the police force’s ability to use network technology to enforce the law, it remains crucial that the law keeps up with technology.

### *All Work and No Play: Technosocial Infrastructures and their Future Importance*

New Voices ended on a playful note. Play isn’t just for children, but is essential for the well-being of all human beings. As much of the world pursues a vision of technology being seamlessly integrated into our lives, and urban living becoming the norm for much of the world’s population, technologically-based forms of play are likely to dominate much of our leisure time within the near future. Play technology may also hold the answers to some of the problems of city living. Recent research has examined the ways in which technosocial networking can be used to create sustainable food culture. Through creating networks which easily allow people to share their food preferences, or offer up leftover food which they are unable

to use, new forms of play technology can bring urban dwellers into a tighter-knit community that takes the notion of borrowing a cup of sugar from a neighbour to a new dimension.

### **New Voices Participants**

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Ms	Jaz	Choi	The University of Queensland
Ms	Philippa	Collin	Inspire Foundation
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Ms	Stephanie	Taylor	Australian Federal Police
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