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COMMENTARY

Is it Web 2.0 or is it Better Information and Knowledge That we Need?

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Abstract

This paper is a response to the Invited Editorial by Anthony Schembri about Web 2.0 and Social Work. We look at the research literature about Information and Communication Technologies and welfare practice and, in addition, report on case study work with Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau. We conclude that before engaging in Web 2.0 initiatives, organisations need to assess their internal ICT capacity.

Keywords: Information management; Knowledge management; Social-Technical research; technology in social and welfare work; Web 2.0

It is commendable that *Australian Social Work* (ASW) has had the foresight to publish an editorial about Web 2.0 by Anthony Schembri of the Sydney South West Area Health Service, in which he enthuses about the possibilities of Web 2.0 possibilities (Schembri, 2008). As Schembri has described, Web 2.0 (sometimes also called the "social web") is a heady mix of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), including blogs (web logs), wikis, RSS (Rich Site Summary), podcasts, messaging applications, and other tools that encourage personalisation, participation, and sharing that can be used for "collective intelligence" (i.e., the pooling and sharing of information and knowledge). Web 2.0 is based upon what is called Content Management System (CMS) software. Content can be text, images, sound, or video containing fact, opinion, or a mix of the two, developed by one person or many, thus leading to collective research and resources. It could be content intended for general consumption, such as a daily or weekly blog or even a videocast from a chief executive officer, or it could be something directed at a very specific group of passworded subscribers (such as online videos and discussion boards on sexual violence counselling).

Although the authors share Schembri's excitement about the possibilities of the new technologies, we have real concerns about the practical reality of Web 2.0 as a one-stop solution for the sort of work that social workers do. We have heard a lot about Web 2.0 at conferences and meetings, particularly in the area of online fundraising and advocacy, but much of this has been based on experiences in the US that have little in common with the sort of situation we work with in Australia. Nor do we accept Schembri's argument that "without immediate engagement" with Generation X, our profession "risks becoming irrelevant and inaccessible" (Schembri, 2008, p. 119). Moreover, we question the extent to which these generations have reached such a high level of sophistication. In our opinion, these are somewhat mistaken perceptions, although there has been very little good research in this area. We would argue that before engaging in Web 2.0 initiatives, organisations need to assess their internal ICT capacity.

To provide depth to our argument, we briefly review the dearth of relevant literature and survey current realities in welfare practice, before presenting a case study of planning for ICT transformation at the Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau (SCAAB) in Melbourne.

Current Realities

There is only one collection of essays about ICTs in social work and much other research is quite dated from a time when desktop computing was rather new. Thus, it is not surprising that older attitudinal surveys showed overwhelmingly negative opinions of ICTs, particularly among women workers (Harlow & Webb, 2003; Lie, 1997). Even a very recent article (Zhang & Guitierrez, 2007) about ICTs in social work was based on current thinking in the field of information systems. Removed from the limited literature about ICTs in social or community work, the article was written in something of a vacuum.

Anecdotally, we believe that few now "fear" ICTs, but they may wonder how a computer can replace good face-to-face work with a client or how ICTs can build virtual "community" when time and resources are at a premium. And, of course, many of the most disadvantaged within the population still lack access to such technologies, although work we have done shows that most people have a mobile phone and many have some opportunity to use the internet. But, from an institutional perspective, our work has led us to the viewpoint that many not-for-profit organisations struggle not just with using their IT, but how to make decisions about their IT and skills, such as information management. Jumping onto what seems to be the current electronic best thing rather than engaging in some hard thinking and planning about what technologies to use can make for very wasteful, costly, and frustrating outcomes.

There is a correlation between the effective planning for technology—particularly in an area like social work—and the internal management structures that allow the effective creation, management, and use of information. This has to be recognised before one gets to decision making about the actual technology to be used. This is a

finding that is clear from advanced research in the corporate setting, but has been little researched and written about for the community or nonprofit sector. This is probably because it has not been seen as a business opportunity; regrettably, policy makers have been driven by corporate management systems thinking rather than more interpretative social insights into the development of information systems (Gurstein, 2007). Furthermore, social work educators may not be aware of, or connected to, research in information systems that confirms the importance of getting human–technology understandings right (Orlikowski, 2000). In particular, this means that the development of systems matched to the needs of social welfare organisations, for what can be characterised as "technologies of care", is somewhat underdeveloped (Stillman, 2006).

Combining the language of information systems research with that of sociology, community organisations that use ICTs can be considered as a type of interpretive sociotechnical network, consisting of human actors and the technology they use to constitute, shape, and communicate information and knowledge, "from the core of mutual knowledge whereby an accountable universe of meaning is sustained through and in processes of interaction" (Giddens, 1976, p. 83). Being able to transform that "mutual knowledge" and "accountable universe of meaning" via and with ICTs is, ideally, what should result from good system design (Orlikowski, 2000, 2002).

Schembri's (2008) view of the possibilities of Web 2.0 confuses the extraordinary and wonderful possibilities of Web 2.0 as a powerful social networking, educational, and entertainment tool with the more prosaic challenges of institutionally managing and creating information and knowledge in our work with each other, with clients, and with our funders. Schembri has not taken into account the true costs of technology, in terms of staff time, installation, and maintenance of robust systems. In addition, there is ample opportunity for diversion of personal and work time, the invasion of privacy, identity theft, and all sorts of internet subterfuge, unwanted hard sell, control, and straight out technical and financial collapse. Finally, the big players in social networking are not making money out of it. Thus, many "free" online tools and websites may just collapse as real technologies if their backers drop out. Beware: There will be a Web 2.0 shake out (Pontin, 2008).

The Case Study

The Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau (SCAAB) provides information, support, and targeted community services for people in the City of Greater Dandenong (Victoria). SCAAB has been in operation for over 37 years and receives funding from a variety of sources at the local, state, and federal levels. The service operates two sites, the main one at Springvale and a youth-specific site at Noble Park. A number of staff also outpost at Oakleigh, Dandenong, Narre Warren, and Cranbourne in the mid-to-outer regions of Melbourne. There are 31 Effective Full-Time (EFT) paid staff and approximately 50 volunteer staff contributing 6,000 hours to assist SCAAB each year.

Most clients (66%) are from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and over 40% have arrived in Australia within the past 5 years. In the 2006/2007 financial year, one-third of service users were born in Australia, with 10.5% from Sudan, 7% from Vietnam, and the rest from over 30 different countries. The Information, Referral, Advocacy, and Support Service (IRASS) of SCAAB provides just over one-third of the 14,000 client services each year and is complemented by a range of specialist services, such as financial counselling, support for people to overcome barriers to employment, youth housing support, and settlement services for new arrivals.

SCAAB's data collection system is over 20 years old and is DOS (Disk Operating System) based, with limited capacity to provide the statistics needed in a now complex social policy and reporting environment. Client files are kept on paper, although some information is entered into databases. However, because of the requirements of some funding bodies, sharing is restricted and, where it can be shared, there in no common database and interface to find files easily. The service has, at its main site, a well-networked system of computers with shared drives, but the branch service cannot access the network, resulting in inconvenient communication gaps. The modest website does not reflect current operations at all, but there is a lack of time, skills, money, and ownership to take charge of it.

We suspect that this picture of a service that is hamstrung by being caught between shelves of paper and an inadequate network is not uncommon. An opportunity arose, through the Doing IT Better (http://www.doingitbetter.net.au) project to be a case study for the project and look at the development of a Client Registration System (CRS) that could be used by the many different programs housed by SCAAB. The Doing IT Better project is a 3-year project between the Centre for Community Networking Research, Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University, and the Victorian Council of Social Service. The goal of the Doing IT Better Project is to enable community organisations to significantly improve both their organisational technological expertise and their ability to transmit that expertise to their clients— ultimately empowering both. The project is also very interested in researching and documenting how good the social outcomes for clients are when supported by ICTs as used by community organisations. Although the project has been able to use excellent resource materials, such as the planning guides for ICT investment and decision making developed through the ICT Hub project in the UK (e.g., http://www.icthub.org.uk/managing_ICT), there is a clear need for localised and institutionally tailored solutions to respond to the particular needs of organisations in Australia.

The case study, which took place in the first part of 2008, was conducted through several means, including staff workshops, surveys, and indepth interviews, using an innovative visual means to represent information processes with staff across a range of programs as a way of helping the organisation take stock of its current information practices and how they could benefit from a whole-of-organisation CRS. Heeding

Giddens' (1984) approach to hermeneutic research, the research team's expert knowledge about information and knowledge systems was fruitfully matched with the workers' every day practical knowledge about information flows. This process was also used so that there would be staff buy-in, participation, and familiarisation with new ideas and terminology about technology. It was designed to remove the boredom and annoyance of feeling "put down" and introduced a degree of optimism, rather than despair or defeatism, about what is possible with ICTs! We intend to publish a number of detailed articles about the research method and findings.

The research process identified the fact that a better CRS is critical for effective information management and sharing, but it is something that cannot work on its own. The research also discovered that there was potential for Web 2.0 tools, but that they would have to be carefully considered in terms of organisation mission and staff resources (particularly skills and time available to use the tools). For example, wikis (an easy-to-edit documentation tool, best known through Wikipedia) to support a community of practice can be used to document almost anything, but, very often, only a few people take up the challenge. As with so many things in organisational development, such initiatives are dependent on resources and personal inclinations. Not everyone is a writer or enthusiastic information sharer, and not everyone is happy about being filmed or taped for a podcast either. These are real, practical issues that need to be considered before investment in such systems.

Thus, personnel at SCAAB have come to the view that the integration of what they regard as its core informational priorities—to get its internal information house in order—is the fundamental bedrock upon which any work with Web 2.0 can occur in the future. Importantly, Web 2.0 is not a free lunch. Reliable CMS, even if they are initially free open source software, do take considerable human investment if systems are to be made easy, accessible, and reliable. After several years of working with Web 2.0 tools, the first author is of the view that the complexity of the tools is considerably underestimated by their advocates. Something may look fantastic on a web screen, but under the bonnet . . . when something goes wrong, help is scarce and expensive, and there is a real skills shortage of good technical help in Australia. For example, even if you put content on a free service, there may be many unanticipated issues around security of content. In addition, if you put software on your own server, you may quickly find that technical hiccups are way beyond your own, or your children's, skill level to fix.

It is also quite wrong to assert, in fact, that help can be readily found on the Internet or through informal personal networks. When dealing with issues of confidentiality and privacy in the sort of work we do, the last thing needed is help from well-meaning volunteers, someone's cousin, or an overseas help desk. Organisations need to be resourced to have their own internal information management specialists, as well as champions, or be able to share a person between organisations if they venture into this area.

Despite current limitations, SCAAB would like to see a Web 2.0 sharing channel as a second step after its CMS initiative. The channel would be focused on welfare and

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community service issues, knowledge, and information in the City of Greater Dandenong and beyond, as a resource for welfare and community workers as well as for clients. The site could contain, for example, resources to assist young refugees to settle in Australia, developed by the young people themselves. Scoping of the real costs shows that substantial long-term investment is required to support such innovation when the real costs of skilled human support are taken into account.

Thus, the sociotechnology mix needs to be considered and well managed if an organisation is to take advantage of the efficiencies that technology can offer, as well as the capacity for new and innovative forms of service to individual clients, the community at large, and interaction with other stakeholders. We have concluded that there are four levels at which the information management structuring can take effect, as shown in Figure 1.

1. The policy and procedural environment is critical to the development of an effective ICT environment. This includes policies for defining who is a stakeholder and what information needs to be known about them, policies for the storage and archiving of paper or electronic records subject to various legislative requirements, and policies about IT systems (e.g., a disaster recovery plan, security access).
2. At the second level, quality data use is a reflection of the systems in place and the organisation's collective intelligence and memory, whether paper or electronic. Knowing what you are doing and how you want it presented will lead to improved
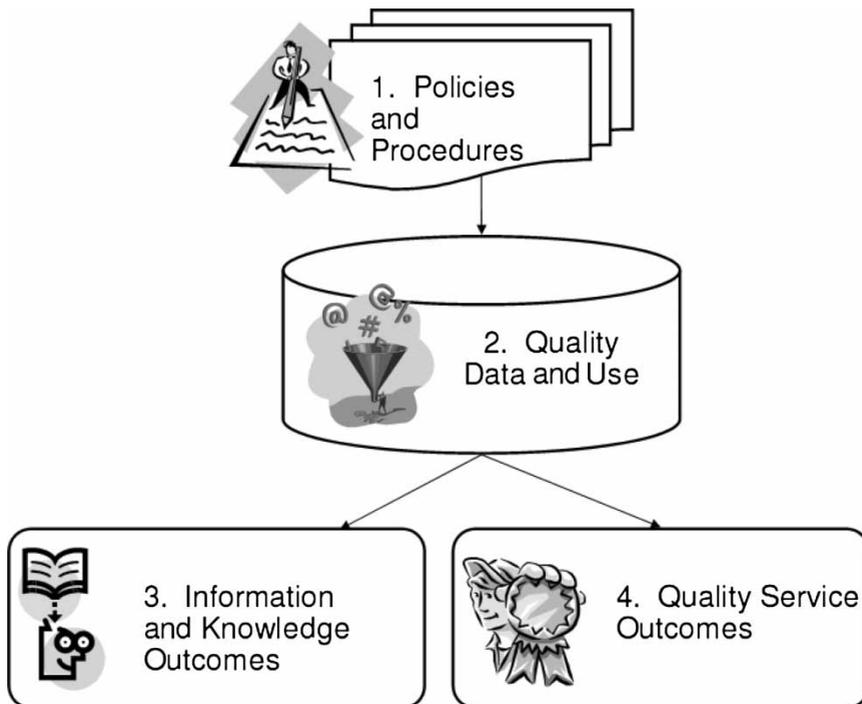

Figure 1 Levels of information structuring.

outcomes at many different levels in terms of capturing relevant information, whether about clients or what staff write in blogs.

3. Third, the strategic use of data outcomes will result in a more intelligent organisation that can respond, with more informed knowledge and expertise, in many different ways to fulfill its core vision and mission.

4. Finally, quality service outcomes are affected by information and knowledge outcomes, whether through having up-to-date information alerts that go by snail mail or electronically (with minimal fuss and no duplicate addresses) or an organisation that is much more knowing about itself—people do not feel institutionally isolated from what is going on. Quality service also includes the changes in quality of life felt and experienced by clients as they use an organisation's service. These may be hard to measure or know directly, but a positive "reputation" is something all organisations crave.

By considering all these factors, the SCAAB committee of management feels far more confident about how to now go about tendering for a CMS. This stage can then be used as a platform to engage with Web 2.0 technologies as part of developing an interactive community of practice for staff, as a means to interact with its different constituencies, and as a means to engage in new forms of community development with communities in need.

However, there still needs to be a real perspective kept on all of this. Disadvantage characterises SCAAB's client base, and it is recognised that such individuals and communities are often the last to benefit from innovation, research, and development that is undertaken generally to benefit the wider community. The social justice mission must remain carefully at the centre of attempts to engage those who are disadvantaged with new ICTs, including Web 2.0.

Conclusions

Web 2.0 is a fabulous social tool, but beware of shiny toys. Research literature offers some insight into how to make decisions about ICT investment, but it is not well developed for the welfare sector. However, the work with SCAAB has shown that an organisation's internal information systems and knowledge management are probably the first priority for many organisations before they engage with the latest online trend. Think hard about what you want to do, particularly how your organisation currently manages its information and knowledge. That should be your priority; and then choose your entry into Web 2.0 very carefully.

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