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Keynote Address: Jon Udell, Info World

Social Software for the Engaged Citizen:
Strategies for Cooperation

Jon Udell is the lead analyst and chief 'blogger' from Info World. He has a book published in 1999 called "Practical Internet Groupware" which is what is now being talked of as social software. Jon shares his insights on social software and its uses and how it can be used effectively within government.

Jon Udell

If government is by and for the people then we need ways for government and the people to work together, which is my claim as to the original purpose and intent of the worldwide web so I would like to point out that although its not widely recognised, Tim Burner's lead in inventing the worldwide web as a means of collaboration and, in fact, the very first web browser wasn't only a tool for reading, it was a tool for writing web pages as well. So originally there was the concept of a two-way flow of information and what we called groupware in the last decade and what we call social software in this decade is largely just remembering and reconstituting what the original purpose of the web was.

I also like to point out that a fellow named Doug Englebert who is mostly known for the invention of the mouse but was also deeply involved in the early development of a number of key technologies, including hypertext and the graphical user interface, in other words, really the foundations of modern software. Doug Englebert's vision was quite broad and I didn't really understand that until I heard him give a talk a couple of years ago in which he spoke about how, at about the age of 25 as a young engineer, he woke up and asked himself what really was going to be the purpose of his life and he had a kind of a revelation that led to the remainder of his career's work which, some of you may have seen a demonstration, it dates back now 40 years in which you see Englebert with the 1960's equivalent of a sky pad set and video chat, and a web terminal. He invented all that stuff and he didn't just think about it, he actually had working software 40 years ago, very similar to a lot of what we have now. But the purpose was to address the challenges that we all face. He really was and is inspired by a deep sense of mission because he sees that, as a species, we face some really serious challenges and his take is that enabling people to work together, to link their minds and their personalities in the web is how we are going to make progress.

The fundamental idea is about shared information spaces, and I am going to talk about three versions of that idea. One theme is what I call annotating the planet, and the idea here is that the planet, the physical planet itself becomes a framework on which we can hang information and around which we can collaborate. The second theme is one of open data, and this is a very interesting case study from Washington DC where they have recently, very softly, launched a programme to publish a vast amount of operational information to the web for anyone to make use of, build applications on top of, analyse and so on. The third theme is one of citizen journalism, the idea being here ways in which citizens are engaging with the political process using, in particular, the medium of logging.

On the first theme, I was actually one of the first people to do a Google Map's mash-up and so this goes back about a year and a half now. My discovery was that it was possible to walk around in my town with a GPS device, collect way points, incorporate those way points into Google maps along with data, so here I have simply annotated some locations in my town, and I've linked, in this case, a picture of the entrance to the cemetery, to this one location.

The general idea that it was possible for anyone to identify a location anywhere on the planet and then, in effect, turn that location into a node of the internet that anyone else could visit, and anyone could associate information with is just extraordinarily powerful.

Back when I first did that original Google Maps mash-up it was a fairly geeky technical operation, let's just say, it wasn't something that anyone else was likely to be able to do very easily but things are moving quickly. So about a year later, I undertook a little project in my community, and what happened is I went out for a hike this Spring after the snow had melted and I was very distressed to see the amount of litter that had accumulated along the roadside after the snow had melted, there were piles of cans and debris, it was really upsetting. So on a couple of walks I took up a plastic bag and I collected a bunch of trash and then I had the idea that I would like to document this project, first of all to document what I had done but secondly to provide a framework that would enable other people perhaps to co-ordinate their activities with mine.

I found a website and, in a way, there is nothing special about this particular website, its just one of many websites that are using Google Maps in combination with other kinds of social software, in this case there is a picture posting service, there is tagging, there is a conversation service. But what I did is, in this case, I didn't use GPS I just went and drew the route that I had taken along my hike and I marked out the locations where I had done the clean up and I took a picture, in one case, of all the stuff that I picked up at that way point number one. Then I invited other people to collaborate with me so the idea was, well, I've scoped out this route and if somebody wants to chip in, probably the next place to go would be way point number two. Actually, I didn't include it here but there is a little bit of discussion thread that happens here as well. The idea being that there is a framework here for people to get together and organise work around some sort of public project, and there really is no obstacle to this other than having the idea to do it. And having the idea to do it is in fact a serious obstacle. This hasn't occurred to very many people, it doesn't dawn on people that it's possible to do this. One of the things I have been working on recently is trying to publicise these ideas more so I've been a series of commentaries on New Hampshire public radio which is the national public radio affiliate in my state of New Hampshire where I live, and in this case I did a little three minute commentary on this project. In my case, the situation that I'm in is that I see lots of collaborative opportunities in these emerging social software tools and I write about it but I write about it for an audience which is primarily, in my case, IT people so I'm not reaching the broader community with these ideas and so this is my attempt to get these ideas more broadly disseminated. But in general I think it is a huge priority.

I think that if no new technology were invented for the next ten years we could all spend our time productively mining the capabilities that we already have because there is a vast untapped potential. One example that I did find, though, of something like this is a project in the town of Lewisham in Great Britain. A similar idea, what happens is that people who are walking round town and see instances of abandoned cars or debris and want to report it to the city, can make a report, I think they can SMS the report or through the web they can make the report where they can telephone it in and then the city services who are responsible for cleaning the stuff up posts these photographs and they track the work that's been done and you can see, in this case, the before and after image proving that the clean-up happened. So there is a tremendous amount of this kind of stuff that I think, again, is simply possible once people get the idea and begin to build the expectation that things, in fact, can work in this way, and they ought to work this way.

This is a picture of an 18th century prank called the Mechanical Turk, the idea was that there was an automaton that could play chess, and of course the reality was that inside the box there was a guy who was a chess master and he was the one you would actually play. Recently, Amazon has come up with a very interesting web service for the co-ordination of work. The way that this works is that through what they call the Mechanical Turk or M-Turk service,

you put out some task which can be partitioned out to many people and it's a framework for the co-ordination of the work that those people do.

The illustration here is that a fellow that I know has a company called Casting Words and his company is based on this Mechanical Turk service from Amazon. What Casting Words does is transcription of audio, so in this case I do a weekly audio programme on my blog, these are interviews with innovators within the IT space, and the interviews are somewhere from half an hour to 45 minutes or 50 minutes, and so I used the service to get the words transcribed. The process was literally submitting the URL of my pod cast to the Casting Words service, the work was farmed out to, I don't know how many transcribers, I don't know where they live, I don't know who they were, and then in a couple of days it came back in an astonishingly reasonable price for this work, and the quality was extremely high.

So, for example, when the hurricane Katrina happened in Louisiana, one of the things Amazon did was invite people to donate, so they provided a way to donate money. But I would rather, and I think a lot of people would, have donated services that they felt were actually making a difference. In particular, one of the interesting collaborative projects that happened around Katrina was a project where people helped find other people by going through a number of resources on the web. People would go through discussion boards, and any public information on the web where there was information that could be used to identify people who were missing, and the way this project happened was that they literally identified a large set of resources and then parcelled it up. You take these 200 pages, and you take this 200 pages and the work was distributed and came back together. What I am suggesting is that the next time something like that happens I bet you will see Amazon, not just collecting money from people to help the relief effort, but providing an infrastructure to co-ordinate the work in an extremely effective way, so that is just a thought for the future.

To bridge the geographical realm to the open data realm this is yet another Google Maps mash-up. It was done by a guy called Adrian Hollavardy, and what he did is took the information from a website which is a police published website in Chicago of reported crime, and what Adrian Hollavardy did, developer of this thing, is extracted with great effort all the information from this website and turned it into a much more well organised presentation, so now you can, using Google Maps, see the distribution of crimes, of types of crimes, by neighbourhood, by date, an extraordinarily effective resource. The point though is that it was necessary for him to do that in a sort of guerrilla style of development because the source, the data source, that he was drawing on had not been prepared in any way for this purpose, it was simply a web application and so he had to do a great amount of what we call scraping the web to retrieve this information. Very recently, there has been an extraordinary programme launched very quietly in Washington DC called DC Stat. I just got to find out about this because the developer is someone that we have worked with at Info World.

The idea of DC Stat is the following: they are taking many of the internal operational data sources, the city services like kerb repair and street report, things like that, those incidents are in a database and are now being published as raw data to the web, or real estate records or business registrations or a number of things related to property and crime. When the DC Stat crime information is available to the web the idea is that the next Chicago crime.org that someone wants to come along and build will be radically easier to do because the data has simply been provided for that purpose so these are the kind of data feeds, they are rolling them out on every two-week basis and they started in June so they are still not completely up to speed with the project but from a developer's point of view, somebody like me, this is what I love to see. This is a file of XML data and its very straightforward. I was actually able to take this data, and you can see that there are latitude and longitude co-ordinates associated with this report about abandoned autos so its actually trivial to incorporate this into a geographic application.

There are a number of interesting issues that these folks are running into. I had a conversation with them just last week. So first of all, and this is, I think, something that they probably wished they had thought more about going into it. At this point, they are dumping a lot of data to the web but they have not provided a framework for the interpretation of that data. There is not a sample application, there is not documentation, so as a developer it would be too easy for me to grab this data and perhaps make a wrong interpretation. I see an XML tag in a file that says that the service request is overdue. Well, what does that actually mean? If I simply count the number of incidents that are overdue and then I publish a report that says that 30% of the incidents haven't been serviced in a timely manner, is that or is that not a fair interpretation? The fact that they are publishing data is an astonishingly interesting and important move on their part, because fundamentally what they are saying is that we want the operation of our government to be transparent, whatever information we have, we have because either you have given it to us or we have collected it in the process of doing your work so we actually regard that as your data and we think you should have the same access to your data that we have, which I agree, I think that is a fabulous thing. I think its also going to force them and the city in general, and the citizens, to work through a number of extremely difficult but important issues. One of them being, what is a public record?

As I am sure you all know, there is a huge amount of information which is notionally public, which is to say, you can go down to city hall and you can dig through the files and you can find this record and there is someone's tax assessment or there is other information about their business or what have you, public data that is on file. But when that public information is suddenly two clicks away, it feels very different to people. In some ways, people's reaction I have observed is that it has now become an invasion of privacy. There was a case in the state of New York I think at one point where a database of voter registration records was made available on the web and people were shocked and reacted as though their privacy had been invaded when in fact it is public data so I think that these kinds of moves are going to provoke a very useful discussion about the nature of public data and as well they have had to draw some lines around certain kinds of data so I think in fact the struggle right now that they are having is before they can put their crime database out in the way that Chicago has they are going to have to decide whether or not to publish exact addresses versus approximate addresses. So, in other words, can they say this crime occurred at the corner of 3rd and 14th, or can they only say this crime, or this type of crime, occurred within this range of blocks. They are laying this out, and I think this is, again, a kind of conversation that's going to be happening in a lot of places and probably will be decided differently in different places, depending on local conditions.

As one of my weekly audio interviews I did speak with Suzanne Pack who is the CIO of Washington DC and Dan Thomas, who is the guy that is the director of DC Stats, from my web log if you're curious later there is about a 45 minute interview with those guys and it goes into a lot of detail about what they've done and also these issues. Its quite interesting, I thought.

From a citizen journalism perspective I have a friend, his name is Simon Sallaron and he lives in a small town in New York outside of Ithaca, a very small town. A couple of years ago he decided he wanted to be more involved in the local government of his town, and his method for doing that was to begin writing a web log which is his chronicle of the political and civic life of the town of Dryden. It was a kind of hobby/project for him but he has stuck with it and I think, now for something like 2 ½ it is pretty much every day written in this web log and, among things, he attends the town meetings and files extensive reports on the town meetings. He is behaving as a reporter would but in fact is documenting the civic and political life of this town, in more detail than is even possible than in the local newspapers because he is doing it on the web, he's not constrained in terms of column/inches, he has other media available to him so he can use audio, and does, and just to give you a sense of it, this is his August town board meeting report, and it is extensive, it's really extensive. More to the point,

he is raising some delicate issues in this report. He is somewhat critical of the process that he observed at that particular meeting, he thought that people weren't stepping up to the plate and living up to promises that had been made and he thought that, in general, things could be going better, and he said so. He was being somewhat critical but, and this is really the key point here, he is also linking to another report on that same meeting from Mary-Anne Sumner and so here is another point of view.

Mary-Anne Sumner is one of the, as you can see, Dryden democrats. This is the beginnings of a phenomenon that I am hoping to see become much more widespread, and much more routine and, in fact, expected, which is that everyone in the community is a stakeholder, and everyone has a point of view, to the extent that everyone's point of view is represented online. We have the possibility to have a much richer debate/discussion/conversation about civic issues. I've been, without much success, trying to persuade the publisher of the newspaper in my town of this view and, in general, newspapers are very afraid of this idea for a variety of reasons. One of which being that it is unfortunately the case that the medium of blogging has been set up in opposition to journalism, in many ways, and so bloggers are seen as watchdogs and antagonists of journalists in the press. I think that is unfortunate, I would rather see a much more co-operative arrangement.

What I am trying encourage to happen is that, for example, in my town there is a development issue around a piece of property in the middle of the town, and so the city planner has a perspective on it, and the developer has a perspective on it, and the local businesses who have bought the property have perspectives on it. What I have been trying to say to the publisher of the newspaper is that if it were the case that the city planner had articulated his thoughts in substantial detail on his web log and the local businesses had done the same, and if the developer had done the same that when the reporter that you send out to do that story goes to speak with those people he's not starting down here with "tell me your name and how long you've been working for the city and what do you know about this project", he's already absorbed a great amount of background information.

The story that the journalist does can begin from a much more sophisticated and informed perspective, that's my argument for why people should embrace this. But you can see the dilemma that people are in. So this is also just a local phenomenon in my community. Winchester Informed Citizen is a little web site in a little town in New Hampshire that is publishing the information that the town itself is not yet putting online so you can't yet go to the town of Winchester's website and find the board meeting minutes but you can find them here. In other words, rather than wait for the town to publish its information they decided that its important to get this out but they are not only publishing the minutes of the board, they are annotating them, and this has raised eyebrows, partly because one of the publishers of this website is a select man so he is in fact part of the town government, so there is a question about objectivity: should this person also be publishing in an independent mode?

I'm not sure how I feel about that, but I think that its certainly quite valid and in fact, I would argue, exactly the process that you would want to have happen for an issue like this to be aired in this way. So the particular issue here is whether or not another select man in the town sold a plot of timber improperly and so on this website all of the public records that document the sale along with annotations and questions. The law is cited, relevant passages are highlighted, the map indicates where the controversy is happening, this is the sale agreement and, again, a public record, this is only being used to provide in a shared information space information sufficient to have the kind of discussion of the issue that, in theory, we would all like to have, and they ask a number of hard questions. This is not yet routine or normal behaviour in terms of the relationship between citizens and, in this case, local government or the relationship between aspects of local government but I would be extremely interested to hear from you folks how you perceive all of this. From my perspective, it's a very good

thing. I know that these kinds of techniques will cause problems for people and I would now like to show you a short film that I took of my district during the recent floods.
(Short film)

Jon Udell

There are two points I would make about this. First of all, it wasn't very hard to do. I got on my bicycle with a little camcorder and rode around town, and captured this documentation, and it was up on the web by the afternoon of the same day before the television crews had showed up from Manchester which is the big city, an hour east of us. So, it served an immediate purpose, which was to inform people about what was going on, because some parts of town were cut off and a lot of people were not actually able to see what was happening downtown. But it also turns out to be serving a more long-term function as well; just a couple of weeks ago one of the city planners got in touch with me because they are now doing an analysis of the flood control in our area and he needed a copy of this film because it was the best documentation that they had of where the flood levels had gotten to in different parts of town.

Its just a nice example of how it is that we have all sorts of interesting tools right now for people to be able to use, just because they can, just because they care about the town that they live in, or the city or the community. They can capture a lot of information and then put it out into shared spaces in ways that, you know, may or may not be entertaining but may also provide the foundation for a lot of the kind of debate, discussion, analysis and co-operation that we need to have happening.

Hopefully that raises some issues and some questions and I wanted to leave lots of time for that, so let's talk!

Edwin Bruce New Zealand

Thanks for that presentation, that was really very informative. Your first point was around, if we did nothing else for ten years we would be able to exploit this technology. I am inclined to agree but would like your comments on a couple of areas. My personal view is that the policies, government policies, access to information policies, even the education levels and comfort with the technology of the citizens that might use this, this technology, is probably going to take ten years to evolve. I'm quite interested on your views on policy development, how government can facilitate this rather than act as a barrier given that many, many of these policies haven't even been thought of. I'll give you an example: the police data you allude to, I've seen numerous examples of government information being made available and you're right, without context, interpretations, sample code and the correct education of the people using it, it isn't that helpful. Then you start thinking, well the government needs to provide assistance with interpretation to data that costs money, should it charge, is that a barrier, should we give it to the private sector and they can distribute the data and they can charge for it? I'm interested in your views on those areas plus the ability to develop policy rapidly enough to be useful.

Jon Udell

So on the question of how you get the guidance and interpretation done? I would like to see it happen as a co-op project because I think that, it would be a perfect educational exercise and there is no reason why it couldn't work that way. That's what I would do if I were the DC Stat programme. I would just open up an internship and bring in some college students, even some high school students, because they are perfectly capable of doing this work and it would be extraordinarily educational for them, it would be extra ordinarily useful to have on their resumes, and frankly they would be cheap. On policy, I'm not sure exactly what the question is.

Edwin Bruce New Zealand

The question is that it is my belief that the possibilities presented by this technology in the use of the web generally requires a set of rules, regulations, laws, acceptable norms, and ultimately policy development. Your example of bringing in college interns is fine but the wholesale dissemination of data into the community and the interpretation of what's private and what's not, whether you should charge or not, whether you should aggregate or not. There are some quite complex government policy issues there, it may take years to sort out. So how do you align your policy development to..... It's like rapid delivery of policy which isn't possible in government!

Jon Udell

Well I certainly can't answer that, I wonder if anyone else has a comment or a thought? That is clearly a key question. Does someone else have an idea about that?

Ann Stewart, Australia

I think its being a little too negative to say that government can't respond in terms of looking creatively at new policy development, and there are wide range of ways in which that can occur, and I think its about creating the environment for contributors to come together to help inform and implement policy directions. Now if that's around developing different privacy impact statements, or other bits but we've got to start rather than say its going to take years. You just got to push the boundary.

Jan Timmermans, The Netherlands

I would like to talk about the dilemmas that government faces in making those kind of Google measures, because in the Netherlands we have had a very large explosion of a firework factory in the city which resulted in all provinces to make risk-charts, where the citizen can see what kind of firework factories are there or, let's say which gas installations. One of the problems was that if you make that information, let's say public, to everybody you also give away information which can be used by terrorists to decide on the main impact points of the infrastructure. So we are still working on that field, what will you do as government? Can you give out that information, or will we have to shield that information?

Jon Udell

That goes back to the policy question. There have to be decisions taken about what constitutes critical infrastructure, and actually that might be a pretty broad category.

Jan Timmermans, The Netherlands

The point is that those risk charts were made on the spur of the moment; everybody thought that was a good idea, and only afterwards everybody started thinking, hey, what are the consequences of those, let's say, actions of government?

Jon Udell

Yes, point well taken. Let me ask you this then. Do you think that the discussion about whether or not, or to a degree, to publish that risk data, that that discussion could be facilitated by an open conversation involving citizens?

Jan Timmermans, The Netherlands

I think the point will be at web point, the discussions started after the charts were made. So at what point would you start or would you like to start such a discussion?

Jon Udell

Well, let's say before, in other words, another aspect of this is that, what hopefully happens is that, all points of view in a debate like that are moved out into a shared information space such that they can be engaged with by anyone who needs to be involved, and I think that is a slightly separate but a kind of key issue. At least in terms of local government my observation is that fundamentally is always driven by those people who can get to the

meetings. A lot of people can't get to the meetings, people have conflicting schedules and so the representation of the civic discussion and interaction is pretty sparse, at least in the areas that I see. I don't think the kind of discussions and debates that would precede a decision like that are themselves necessarily confidential, would they be? Right, it would be open to discussion. So then my point would be let's find a way to make that discussion more transparent, more available and more open to interaction. Theoretically, you would get a better outcome when there is more stakeholders engaged with that problem, because it is a hard problem.

Martha Doris, US

We had a lot of discussions about outreach and communication with citizens about the services that we have available, and we are looking into things like, I know in the US, the department maybe has a recruitment ad or whatever on My Space. What do you recommend in terms of these types of tools to actually reach the populations since so many people are online and especially the teenagers, to let them know. I would be interested if anybody here has used any of these tools like My Space or Blogs or anything to actually inform their citizenry about services that may be available.

Jon Udell

Well, that's great. Who has? Who in the room has been involved in a kind of outreach that involves, let's say a Blog or My Space or some social website? Basically, not happening. My personal theory is that that would be a compliment, in other words the technology of Blogging is fundamentally built around the idea of syndication. If I am an entity, if I'm a government entity then indeed my primary on-line presence and identity should be whatever the domain name of my government entity is that makes sense to me but it is also a reasonable strategy to flow some of the information, to replicate some of the information out into places where as you say the kids are hanging out so you want to appeal to them. I think that's probably a good strategy. I'll give you an example actually because I was trying to do a public radio commentary in fact on My Space and I got a lot of push-back from the radio guy – he thought this is just stupid, these kids are just wasting their time and it is ridiculous and I said well actually there are serious and professional ways to use this medium and he disputed that so I found an example and the example was a woman, a real estate lawyer who is transitioning to music law, so she has an On My Space page and it says I am not here to make friends and choose favourites I am here because I am interested in meeting musicians because I want to work with you guys. So you know for her it made professional sense. It's also a music community in many ways. From my government perspective, would there be the intersection of interests? Its not so clear to me but it probably couldn't hurt.

These policy questions are profound. I would like to hear a little bit more about that if someone has something to say? Does this seem risky? Does this seem scary? Does this seem ill considered? Does this seem, on the other hand, useful and democratic? What do you folks think about this?

Bob Assirati, UK

It just occurs to me that however difficult we think it may be to put those policy frameworks and however long it is going to take, its not going to stop the citizen picking up on whatever information is there and making use of it, and possibly getting a clearer picture of what's going on than government has.

Jon Udell

Yes, I do agree. It's also interesting to think about the extent to which governments, in some ways, potentially can be bypassed by citizens. The potential of these technologies; consider, for example, mapping. Right now, there are canonical and authoritative sources of map data but if you think about a world in which there are billions of people walking round with cell phones which have GPS in them and which are connected to a network, then you see that –

the population of human beings walking around on the planet are going to collectively map the planet. At some point, that will become, arguably, the authoritative, the more complete, and the more up-to-date source of geographic information. There is a process in mapping that they call 'ground truthing', and Map Quest and these guys, they hire people to drive around and compare what is actually happening on the ground to what the map says, because the local conditions are always varying. We are getting to a place where the most effective way for that to happen is going to be this widely de-centralised, networked, loosely coupled kind of collaboration that is ultimately just a voluntary and almost involuntary, just automatic consequence of people moving around the surface of the earth. Its happening anyway so its not a choice really, whether to engage it, its only a choice of how to engage it, I think.

Frank McDonough, USA

Do you see people who are potentially authors using these reach-out tools to publicise what might be a forthcoming book?

Jon Udell

Oh, absolutely, yes.

Frank McDonough, USA

Could you talk briefly how that is done?

Jon Udell

Sure. There is a guy, Tom Barnett, he is a firebrand right now in the world of the Pentagon, he is an analyst and has put together a really compelling view of strategy for the Middle East. He had a first book called "The Pentagon's New Map" and it was a pretty big success. As is typical, it took a while to get the first book written and then he needed to re-charge his batteries so he started writing on a web log, and the way he describes that process is that the engagement that he had with the readers of his first book through this interaction on his web log provided him with the fuel to do the next book. The next book happened very quickly, so absolutely, absolutely.

Martha Dorris, USA

We talked here about trust in government, and how big the trust in government is to us trying to provide e-services. Do you have any idea about the impact of logs on the trust in government? I know many companies actually monitor the blogs to see the kind of issues that are starting to bubble, because in many cases the issues are underground, on the blogs, way before they either hit the press or they are the reason that is what is actually gets them to hit the press. All of us need to be thinking about how these blogs, even..... We have done some testing on through our firstgov search engine on just official government information versus Google by searching on the same words and I contend that the blogs are having a big impact on search results on the big search engines because of the popularity, they are using their blogs in their algorithms. It seems to be a huge issue that we haven't talked much about.

Jon Udell

So here is an example that I have used in the past, its actually related to digital identity. A couple of months ago my sister, who is not a technical person at all, sent me an email and it was pointing to a little video that was made by the ACLU, the American Civil Liberties Union, and it was a dark vision of digital identity gone wrong. It was a little mock documentary in which you see the pizza clerk taking an order over the telephone and you see how she is connected into all of the guy who is calling in: she is connected in to all of his health records, and she says well I'm sorry Mr So and So but you've had a heart attack so we can't give you a double-meat cheeseburger, and oh the delivery charge will be \$5 extra because you live in an orange zone. The guys says "orange zone? I don't live in an orange zone". She says well you do now, there was a crime there last night, so she is wired into all these things. It's basically this Orwellian vision of everything gone wrong.

What I did was, I realised that I had actually seen this thing many months before, it had made the rounds in the blogosphere. In fact, what I was able to do was I was able to go back and chart the references to the thing over time, so I could actually see going back about 8 months. In the, I don't want to say the mainstream consciousness, but at least in the blogosphere; this was a big topic of discussion back in July, and then there was another spike a few months later. Anyway, 8 or 10 months had gone by and this had gotten out, and my sister's comment was, I thought, really interesting. She said "I think that its already too late, if this is not the way the world is now it's the way the world is going to be and there's nothing we can do about it, we are resigned to that fact".

What made this very interesting is that the next day one of the bloggers that I read, Phil Winderley, he was previously the CIO of the state of Utah, and is now a professor at Brigham Young University, has written a book on digital identity. He is a leading authority in the world on digital identity and he pointed to this thing, which he was seeing for the first time and the reason he was seeing it was because he had subscribed to a guy called Kim Cameron, Kim Cameron being Microsoft's identity architect, he is the guy at Microsoft, in other words, who is inventing the future of digital identity – at least from the Microsoft perspective. Kim is doing a very good job, he has articulated, in fact, policy about what are the right ways to use personal information, and the wrong ways, and how these identity agreements should work. In his world, he has thought about this stuff very carefully, he was completely unaware of the fact that there was this ACLU video which had reached I don't know how many people and had already convinced I don't know how many people that nothing that Microsoft was likely to provide was going to work because it was already too late. My point to him was exactly really what you have just said: one of the things you want to do is monitor what's happening out there in the world of opinion as it intersects with your agenda because its easy to do, its very very easy to track these ideas, these means flowing through the blogosphere. It is an excellent source of strategic insight.

Philip O'Reilly, Ireland

I want to make a comment back on the issue that you were talking of earlier on the policy issue around what's public information, what's private information. Some of us have already said seem to suggest that we were confronting these for the first time but most administrators, nearly all of the administrators in the room, have gone through the wave of freedom of information, and they had to do in bringing about that legislation, they had to confront those very issue, all be it maybe at a lesser level. I am sure that at the time, as I recall it, in most administrations people were quite fearful: this is going to change the world as we know it, how are we are going to run an administration if we are in a fishbowl or whatever, so its really partly the same thing.

One of the things about it is that by taking it to a new level by broadening it out, if you take on freedom of information, to a large extent even though all of the information, as you said, is available in city hall if you go and look for it, to a large degree it is available by people who have the time and the resources, which may be journalists or whatever. Therefore, the people who take the effort to go look for it, if they are re-publishing it, or, needless to say, put their own slight spin on it, by broadening it out through the blogosphere, as you say, you are bringing it out to a broader audience and what in fact may happen is that you get a far more balanced publishing of information. So I don't think government's administration have that much to fear, all they have to do is to have a re-look and go through the same sort of phase of, well okay, its going to a broader audience now but I think the issues are primarily the same and in fact, there may be far more balance in it than before, and there may be advantages in there.

Jon Udell

I think that's right. In fact, I meant to suggest that the fear is more on the part of the citizens because this information, as you say, its what I call notionally public but practically obscure. In a practical sense it is still obscure so you don't feel that your tax records or your voter registration are two clicks away. You just don't think that that is the case and when you see it happen, it's shocking. It just unsettles people. I think that ultimately most people will come to terms with that because they will sit back and think well this is public information and yes, I'm surprised its as easy to discover but what's the alternative and would I want it any other way? I think when people go through that process they will come to the right conclusion. It's just that they haven't been confronted with the reality of such dramatically easy access. It takes some getting used to, it's surprising.

Philip O'Reilly, Ireland

If they agree that under FOI I think that some of the bigger issues were it did revolve around personal information, I think that people thought were personal to them. Because it involves somebody else, suddenly whether they were Mr Dolores or whatever they were, suddenly there was a big debate over whether the information that they provided was public or private. So I think the groundwork is there, we just need to work at the issues. A very interesting presentation, thank you.

Martha Dorris, USA

I want to take this opportunity to thank Jon. I think its pretty obvious that this is the initial discussion that we're going to have on this subject. Over time, maybe ICA can look further into this and how governments are using it, both to engage their citizens and to communicate.