

Crossing the Great Divide: Connecting Citizens to Government in New South Wales, Australia

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Communicating and Connecting

In February, 1997, the New South Wales (NSW) government released its information technology plan for the state, *Information Management and Technology Blueprint for NSW: a Well-Connected Future*. The Blueprint provided the strategic framework for the delivery of "accessible and responsive" services to the community through the effective management of information and technology resources. This was followed in December, 1997 by a further document, *An Internet Strategy for NSW: connect.nsw*, which set out a number of strategies for exploiting the potential of the Internet to benefit communities, business and government. These included developing internal infrastructure to integrate technology-based activities across the whole of government, electronic service delivery to business and the community, supporting electronic commerce and developing and supporting networked communities across the state.

With these strategy documents, the NSW government signalled its belief in the importance of the strategic use of information technology to better manage government activities, to enable business to compete effectively in the global knowledge economy and to ensure benefits accrue to the whole community. This approach reflects that of other governments in Australia and across the globe. In the last decade, there has been a considerable expansion in the use of information technology to deliver government services, to inte-

grate and coordinate the activities of diverse government agencies and to develop commercial partnerships with the private sector. More recently, the Internet has become central to these broad strategic objectives as the preferred medium through which a government can communicate its activities to the public and the public can communicate its needs to the government.

This article will explore the theme of connecting citizens to government looking particularly at the strategies being implemented in NSW to provide greater public access to government information and the assumptions underpinning those strategies. The policy approach underlying the Internet Strategy will also be examined to identify the level of understanding demonstrated about the needs of the community in relation to government information and about how they access and use this information. Of particular interest is the extent to which the public voice is heard in the policy process.

The information technology plans of many countries have been operating for some time and are now in advanced stages of implementation. The plans of countries such as the United States, Canada, Singapore and the United Kingdom, for example, have provided models for the development of technological infrastructure for communication and information flow. In some ways, these major technology plans represent the national information policies that many governments, including those in Australia, struggled with in the