

PART III

*Chapter 28*

# Leveraging Technology to Engage Young People

*by*

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*Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa* (Greetings, greetings, greetings to you all)

As obvious as it may sound, it must be stressed that an open and inclusive government cannot truly exist without including youth. A government cannot hope to be inclusive in the future if the youth of today – future voters and future contributors to open policy – are already being “disengaged” by systems that seem outmoded and irrelevant to their lifestyle. The antidote to disengagement is to identify technologies that young people use on a daily basis, provide us with government services in a form that we are used to and then back it up with legal structures that demonstrate that government is able to adapt to our technical innovations. To a young person, the fact that putting music from a CD they own on to their iPod is still illegal (in New Zealand at least) is a clear reason to believe that government has no relevance to their daily lives. To appear relevant, and be truly inclusive, government must not allow itself to fall behind change in the way voters live.

### **Building trust with youth**

An open government is also a necessity for young people. Today’s technology means people can and will bypass official sources of information, and efforts at censorship prove ineffective when faced with the relative anonymity and cross-border nature of the Internet. Internationally, revealing e-mails and information have ended up on political blogs long before elected politicians or government officials have made any comment on the issue. It has sometimes been said that youth distrust authority, but in fact what we distrust most are hypocrites who only feign interest in our affairs. Openness in all steps of decision making, as far as is practical, allows youth to be assured that consultation is not merely salutary but builds trust with youth, which is invaluable. A simple demonstration that our wishes have been reflected in concrete, completed legislation and policy might go a long way in curing the scourge of “disaffected youth” that newspapers seem to love writing about.

### **Sending a text message to government**

The applause we gave to politicians branching out into blogs and YouTube in 2007 is symptomatic of the fact that we are accustomed to having policy thrown at us but very little of our input incorporated into the finished product. It seems that this is a paradox of accessibility and effectiveness. While civil service in this country seems open and eager to consult, it appears largely faceless and powerless to us as youth. Conversely, politicians have the charisma and power that can carry an issue to public awareness, but only the most committed young New Zealanders would bother to visit their local MP on the one day a week they are in their electorate office.

This is where technology once again becomes important. By virtue of being servants of the public, politicians have a duty to make themselves as easily contactable as possible. For young people like me, the keystone of an inclusive government in New Zealand is the

growth of communications infrastructure. Technology has provided young people with a wealth of tools which we have integrated into *our* lives. The problem is that policy makers have not yet integrated them into their work. When direct contact with government or any corporation becomes as simple as an everyday activity like sending a text message to your friends, then neither physical distance nor generational differences will impede open policy making and open government. I believe that an easy and effective access to government would encourage all of us, but particularly youth, to keep voting and to keep participating in government in the future.



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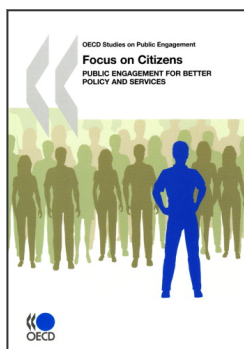
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