

E-GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA: THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT'S MYQ2 INITIATIVE

Author 1 and Author 2¹

In 2009 the government of the state of Queensland, Australia developed and launched a public, strategic vision for the state and its people entitled Toward Q2. Like many similar government media activities these days, the vision was articulated primarily via the Internet: a commonplace form of e-government. Yet Toward Q2 is soon to be accompanied by a more innovative form of e-government through another initiative – MyQ2. MyQ2 is a website that takes seriously the power of social media in building governmental interaction with citizens. MyQ2 involves participants choosing, tracking and reporting commitments they make to achieve real change in their everyday lives. The changes involve living healthier, environmentally friendly, and community supportive lives. If achieved, each one, in a small way, contributes to the government's goals for a state in which citizens are collectively more responsible for social change for better outcomes and more efficiency in public administration. This paper will focus mainly on describing MyQ2 so as to demonstrate how it represents a new form of e-government that uses social media to build civic engagement, while doing so in a way specific to the needs of government. MyQ2 demonstrates how the use of Web 2.0-based approaches enables governments, in theory at least, to mobilise citizens to become active participants in the operational achievement of governance.

1. Introduction

For some twenty-five years now, most western liberal democratic nations have operated with a ideological stance favouring free-market economics and a reduction in the influence of governments. While governments still play very significant roles in such societies, they consciously position themselves mainly as the facilitators of private sector development. For various reasons, good economic policy has been thought to involve reductions in taxation (permitting increased economic activity outside of government), with reductions in government services and – where such services are still provided – intense attention to providing them at least cost. Australia has been at the forefront of this particular form of government and, while the effects are mainly seen at a national level, state (provincial) governments also have been consistently reducing public expenditure wherever possible or carefully controlling it so as to achieve disproportionately effective results. Such circumstances have meant that individual citizens are seen not just as responsible for good governance through their economic activity in the marketplace outside of the direct control of government but also as important actors in achieving results traditionally thought to be a government responsibility. Put simply, health, education, environmental sustainability and

¹ The authors gratefully acknowledge support and information provided by the Premier's Department, Government of Queensland (particular Cathi Collier) and the advice of co-researchers Axel Bruns, Adam Swift and Terry Flew, Queensland University of Technology.

so on are now characterised in socio-political discourse as a civic responsibility, shared between the governed and governments [2]. As a result, western governments routinely now engage in campaigns to mobilise citizens towards outcomes which ultimately seek to decrease public expenditure by forestalling problems (ill-health, disadvantage due to poor education etc) which otherwise can only be solved by government expenditure. And, in recent years – for reasons of cost, efficiency and a general tendency towards ‘e-government’, the Internet has become a popular and increasingly important way in which these mobilisation campaigns are run.

This paper looks at one such campaign and its broader context of citizen-government interaction by examining in detail the Queensland Government’s plans for its MyQ2 website which helps activate a particular form of civic behaviour in the service of social and political goals via an innovative social media / social networking approach. The first part of this paper describes in detail the key features and processes that users encounter at the MyQ2 website. This section begins with a brief look at *Toward Q2*, a much more simple and old-fashioned kind of e-government, so as to set MyQ2 in context. The section demonstrates how MyQ2 is a much more innovative form of governmental activity online, particularly in the way it engages users and mobilises them to perform the actions needed to fulfil government agendas. The second part of this paper then draws some important conclusions from the efforts of the Queensland government to use Web 2.0 approaches in this way. We will provide a brief analysis of the ways MyQ2 does not fully occupy the same space online as social media and explore the valid reasons for this situation. We will demonstrate how MyQ2 differs also from other forms of innovative, so-called Gov 2.0 online development in that it aims to recruit, mobilise and manage citizens’ behaviour, rather than seeking and using their participation in the original formation of policy and planning. We conclude with directions for future research.

2. MyQ2: An innovative approach to web-based governance

2.1 *Toward Q2*: the origins of MyQ2

The origins of the MyQ2 web initiative lie in the development in 2008-2009 of the *Toward Q2: Tomorrow’s Queensland* strategic agenda for the state of Queensland. *Toward Q2* (see <http://thepremier.qld.gov.au/tomorrow/introduction.aspx>) sets out a vision for the ongoing economic and social development with long-term targets to be achieved by 2020 in five priority areas: economy, environment, education, health and community; it also provides a conceptual framework within which all state government plans and operations can be conducted so as to achieve these targets. Central to *Toward Q2* is the idea of ambitions that create this framework and produce a clear indication of the outcomes which attention to the priority areas will produce. These ambitions are for Queensland to be *strong* economically, *green* environmentally, *smart* educationally system, have a *healthy* population, and be a *fair* society. In its own words, *Toward Q2* is “A state-wide plan for the future”. Given the division of responsibilities for public service within the Australian federal system,² this agenda is entirely straightforward: it emphasises economic growth so as to ensure that income – both public and private – is sufficient for Queensland to be an

² Briefly, the Australian federal system balances central and state government power and responsibilities in a way that is more centralised than in the United States of America, but more distributed and local than in most European nations.

effective political jurisdiction; it brings to the fore two key areas of public sector delivery of services – health and education – for which state governments are responsible (and which therefore tend to be the main basis for successful election of governments); and it takes seriously the much broader issue of environmental sustainability which has become critical to both government and political success in Australia at a time of growing concern about climate change. Perhaps unusually, however, it also focuses the government on the question of fair and sustaining communities – recognising that social disadvantage needs to be addressed not just through economy, education and the like but by strengthening the way that society functions to support all of its members, but especially those disadvantaged.

Like most, if not all, current government strategic agendas, the public dissemination of *Toward Q2* is achieved via the World Wide Web, utilising a relatively sophisticated website to provide information, at varying levels of detail, about *Toward Q2* and the progress being made to achieve it. Information is provided in summary form, in an accessible way, utilising the five ambitions to organise and present material for easy public consumption. This summary is backed up with more extensive documents (downloadable files), videos of the Premier, Anna Bligh, announcing and discussing the plan, and – importantly for a website that has a political as well as governmental purpose – reports on the success in achieving targets. There are many publicity-oriented reports of events and activities, particularly those which demonstrate how *Toward Q2* is being implemented. Furthermore, the site includes certain basic interactive elements that enable citizens to contribute, in small measure, to the policy and operational development of *Toward Q2*. A ‘Share your ideas’ feature enables readers of the site to provide comments. Users can subscribe to a regular e-mail newsletter which not only enables them to stay in touch with the activities but also, of course, enables further targeted emailing of information to the addresses thereby collected. Application forms and procedures for community and other groups who wish to participate in *Toward Q2* schemes are accessed and submitted at the site. Opportunities for public consultations and forums – held in person – are announced and reported at the site. The site is clearly presented, well designed and has an effective information design. It is embedded within the well-organised website infrastructure of the whole of the Premier’s website (see figure 1).

Toward Q2 is, therefore, a very clear example of high-quality application of the early concepts of e-government. It is what we might call now, state of the art Gov 1.0. That is – it stands as an example of the effective use of the Internet for the dissemination of government information, for both political and governmental reasons, with relatively limited and constrained mechanisms for citizen-government interaction. This sort of e-government basically constructs site users as a relatively passive audience whose personal responses and creativity – while recognised – are largely channelled and controlled in ways that fit them into the existing expectations and requirements of the government for an attentive and compliant polity. The site shows how e-government does still increase the degree of information a society has about its political leaders’ plans and perspectives, but does so in a way that largely reinforces the power and authority of those leaders. At the same time, it demonstrates limitations even in achieving its own purposes. If, fundamentally, the purpose of *Toward Q2* is to mobilise Queenslanders to participate in, promote and therefore achieve the outcomes – to become an active part of the government’s plans in their own interest – then the website fails to do more than simply inform. By and large, *Toward Q2* is presented via its website as information, to be consumed, and reports about what others are doing, with very little real engagement of its readers. This situation is, of course, partly about the nature of *Toward Q2* as a strategic vision: it is very hard, if not impossible, to utilise the web for innovative, engaging e-

government which treats users as active participants when the founding purpose of the site is to demonstrate didactly the way in which those users (the citizens) are being looked after by their government. MyQ2 is very different, both as a government program and as a way of using the Internet for e-government. It is, clearly, a leading example of Gov 2.0 – in contrast to the Gov 1.0 approach found in its originating strategy partner, *Toward Q2*. What then does MyQ2 seek to do, and how is this purpose implemented in the design of its web environment?

2.2 MyQ2: Active engagement with *Toward Q2*

MyQ2's (<http://myq2.mediasphererp.com/>)³ purpose is clear from its name: it seeks to promote the overall goals and processes involved in *Toward Q2* by making them a personal, individual component of the lives of individual Queenslanders. In other words, MyQ2 puts 'me' into the picture of state growth and development. MyQ2 is designed around the same five key ambitions that serve to structure *Toward Q2* and which, in their simplicity, also serve to communicate the strategy clearly to Queensland citizens. Thus, MyQ2 promotes fair communities, healthy people, a green environment, smart citizens and a strong economy. But the central purpose of MyQ2 is to motivate individuals to take action, in their own lives; each action taken will, little by little, add up to the broader collective goals. For example, if *Toward Q2* says that Queensland needs to become a healthier place, and broadly declares government actions and targets for the state as a whole, MyQ2 asks each user to become a healthier individual. As MyQ2 states about itself: "MyQ2 gives you tools and advice about simple things that you, your friends and family can do right now to make tomorrow's Queensland strong, green, smart, healthy and fair. Everyone – individuals and families, business and industry, communities and all levels of government – can join."

The main way in which people can use MyQ2 is by making formal commitments, at the website, to one of many different actions that will increase health, better serve the environment, improve education and so on. To do this, users first create an account and simple profile for themselves which they use to login to the site. The profile includes the option for an image (whether a real picture or an icon is at the user's discretion). It can allow users to display their real name or a pseudonym. It requires users to provide a valid postcode within Queensland. An email address is also required and is used to confirm profiles prior to activation. Once a profile is created, the primary purpose of the site becomes operational – users search for, select and then commit to doing things in their everyday lives which contribute to the overall goals. For example, a user can commit to drinking less alcohol, or being physically active, or avoiding excessive sun exposure so as to be more healthy. A user could commit to recycling their garbage, or reducing use of air conditioners so as to be more green. In all there are many different commitments for each of the five broad ambitions, all designed to be simple, effective steps which individuals can take.

The commitment process enables users to personalise their decision as well. For example, when a user clicks on the commitment link "I will volunteer this week", they are able to specify the number of hours in the coming week in which they will volunteer; similarly, when committing to smoke less cigarettes, users can nominate the number they will cut down. Having chosen a commitment and started to process of agreeing to it, users are also provided with useful information about

³ At time of publication, the MyQ2 website is still to be released formally and currently exists at this development address.

government programs or other initiatives that might support their commitment (including links to relevant web-based resources). Users can also see the difficulty of the commitment (from easy to very difficult), as well as links to the profiles of other users who have already made this commitment, or have achieved it already. Each user's profile details, on a running basis, the commitments made, those still in progress and those achieved. A limited amount of personal commentary is also allowed to make it even easier for each individual making a commitment to also make it *their* commitment; users can also opt to be reminded by email of their commitment (see Figures 1 and 2)

The screenshot shows the MyQ2 website interface. At the top, there is a Queensland Government logo and navigation links for Logout, Home, Site map, Contact us, and Help. A search bar is also present. Below the navigation bar, the main content area is titled 'Commitments to make a difference. Browse through them all here.' The current commitment is 'I will walk a certain distance this week', categorized as 'Healthy' and 'Difficulty - Medium'. The page includes a 'What difference will this make?' section explaining the benefits of walking, and a 'What can you do?' section with suggestions like participating in the 10,000 Steps Challenge and setting up a walking school bus. On the right, there are sections for 'Impacts made' (680 km covered) and 'Members who have achieved this commitment' (listing users like Kat, Cindy Lou Who, James Hack, Nicole Tabb, and michael billinghurst).

Figure 1: Example of a commitment page at the MyQ2 website

Make a commitment

Personalise your commitment

I will have alcohol free days this

Would you like an email reminder about this commitment?

No thanks
 Yes please

Remind me

You'll need to set email reminders to "on" in your profile to receive this reminder!

Would you like to do this automatically when you submit this form?

No thanks, I'll do it myself
 Yes please

Why not also add some extra comments to appear in your progress update?

Figure 2: How a commitment can be personalised and linked into the everyday life of users off-site

MyQ2 sets up a kind of automated networking between individual users by letting each user see what others are doing when making commitments, searching for them, and reviewing progress. The MyQ2 website lists all profiles of users as ‘MyQ2 community’ which enables users to see themselves as part of a much wider process of Queensland civic engagement with the broad and unarguable goals of achieving a better society. This sense of personal, yet collective action is also promoted by the way the system tracks and utilises the data from each person about their commitments made and achieved. This data enables a visualisation of the overall impact of people’s actions and, when linked to postcodes, the distribution of effort across the whole of Queensland. To emphasise how individual users’ actions add up to a much more significant collective achievement the front page of the website is dedicated to an interactive visualisation map, including options for comparative statistics and greater detail on particular commitments in the five thematic groupings (see figure 3) ([6] for the importance of visualisations to add value to data for government):

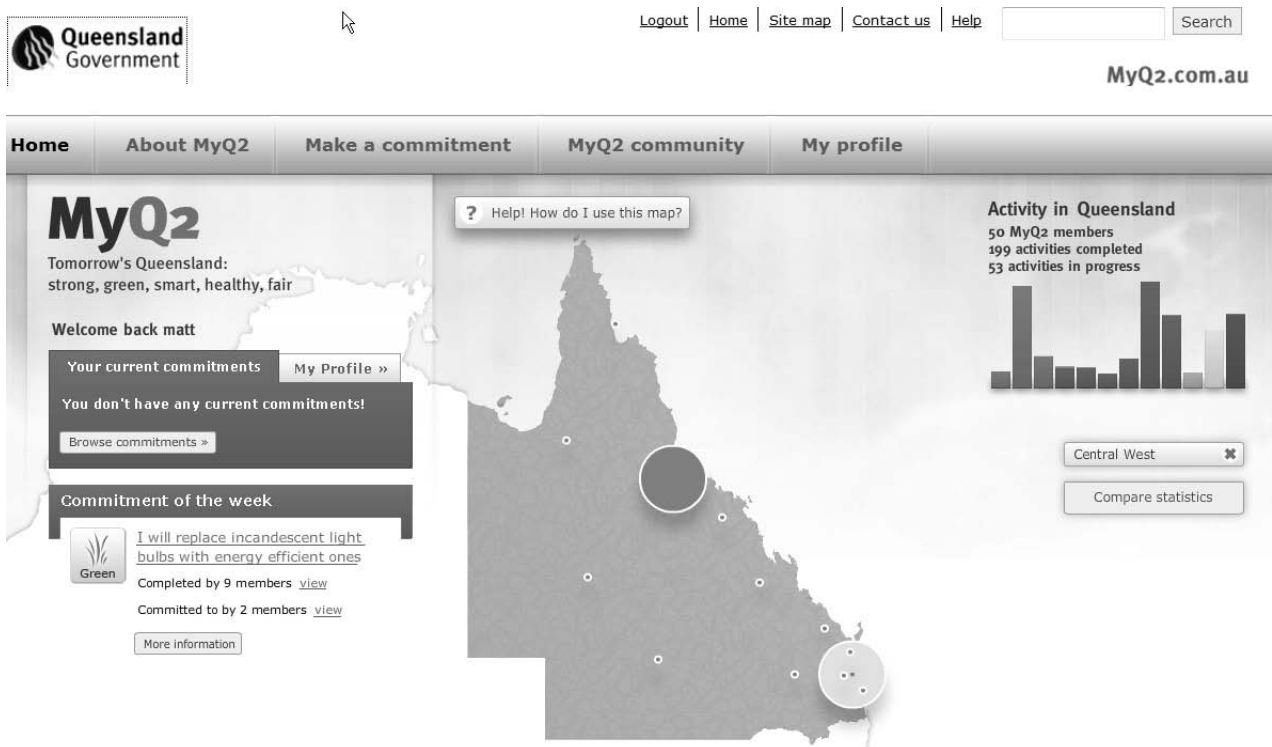


Figure 3: Front page of MyQ2 showing visualisations mapping and statistics options

At the same time, users can then see, in their own profiles and those of others, a similar impact measurement, as well as a rolling log – not unlike a blog – of their commitments: as the site declares, ‘MyQ2 is all about me – the commitments I make and the actions I take’ (see figure 4). There is, therefore, a strong interplay between the individual commitments that users make, creating a sense of ongoing participation over time by each individual, and the overall longer-term impact which the actions of *all* users is creating.

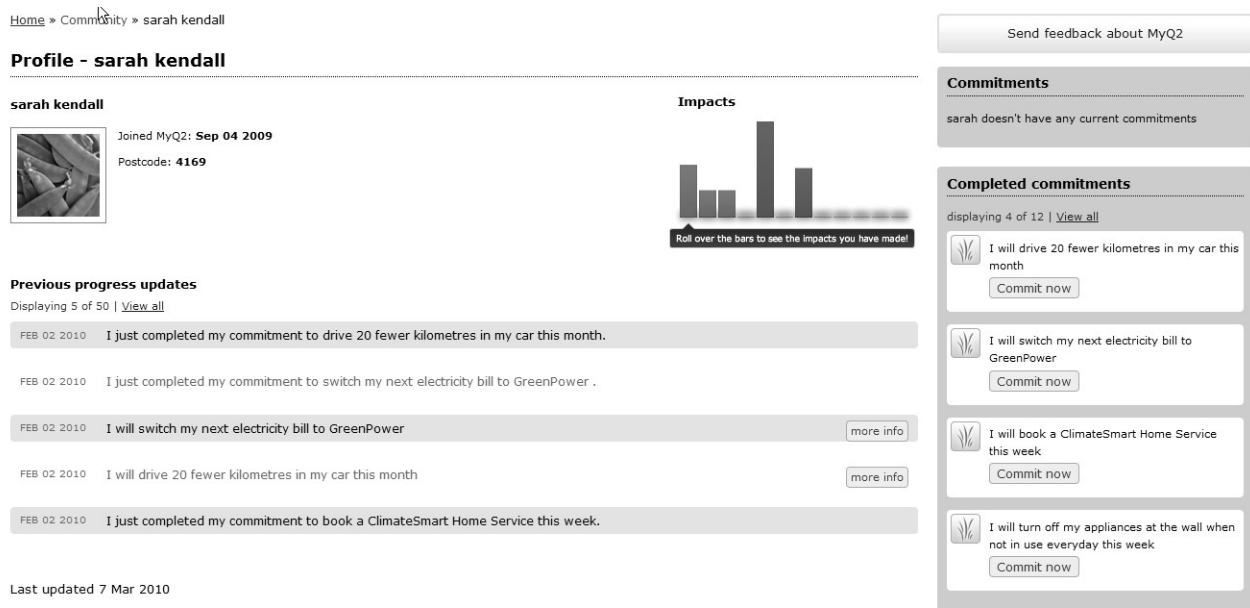


Figure 4: Example of individual profile on MyQ2; other users can click from here to make commitments

In conclusion, then, MyQ2 is part and parcel of the overall *Toward Q2* governmental agenda but represents a very different kind of e-government initiative than the *Toward Q2* website. *Toward Q2* – while publicly disseminated via the web – does not in any way rely on the web – while the web enhances the distribution of information and marginally increases the degree of interaction between the government and citizens, *Toward Q2* does not in any way rely on, or exploit, the Internet’s particular capabilities to achieve greater effectiveness in outcome. While a well-designed web presence, *Toward Q2*’s website is still, in essence, ‘old media’: substituting a website for print, pamphlets, billboard and television and radio. MyQ2 could not, in contrast, do anything *without* the web. MyQ2 therefore serves as a leading-edge example of new e-government possibilities utilising user-based actions and dynamic data visualisations. Yet MyQ2 is not like most web 2.0 / social media site – there is limited opportunity for user-generated content; the focus of activity is largely ‘offline’ (most of the commitments take users away from their computers and emphasise physical interactions); and the potential for deep networking is limited by the lack of communications options (chat, messaging and so on). However, MyQ2 represents a very significant change and a particular form of social media use that is suited to the kind of governmental objectives outlined in the strategic planning from which it originated. What then can we learn from MyQ2 as an example of new forms of e-government?

3. What MyQ2 teaches: governance and social media

3.1 The challenge of social media for e-government

It has become common place for social media services that have developed in recent years in the so-called Web 2.0 revolution [1] to provide users with many features that promote regular and direct user generation of content for the site, either in the form of comments or other short messages displayed online or chunks of content such as videos or text which serve as the primary basis for the

site. Moreover, while many sites have a particular focus or purpose, they are normally very open to multiple uses by users. Such social media sites effectively combine, in one place, information transmission and publishing, asynchronous (and even synchronous) communication, information management (via tagging), and emphasise user-to-user interactions to produce a variety of communities, networks, and other groupings (loose or tight) between individuals. Sites also routinely attempt to interlink with others, especially those principal social media services such as Facebook, Twitter and the like, which have a very large user base. While the variety of social media sites is now so large that it can be difficult to precisely delimit exactly what features and functions might 'define' social media, it is clear that all effective efforts to produce social media behaviour will involve technologies that "build on Web 2.0 technologies to provide space for in-depth social interaction, community formation, and the tackling of collaborative projects" [3].

MyQ2 provides a particular kind of social media experience which is limited in its connection with other sites and services, does not promote significant user-to-user communication, nor permit much user-generated content, *except* by the way that users commit to actions which are then displayed and tracked. This approach does not, however, mean that the site is not social media: just that it is a constrained form, made necessary by the conditions of public, government-organised web provision with a particular purpose. Rather than duplicate the more open forms of online engagement already found (and used) by Queensland citizens for this kind of communication, MyQ2 deliberately focuses their attention on particular ways in which they can communicate online – communicating only by first committing to act and thus initiating users into the community of 'participants' who are exercising their civic duty to perform in the collective interest. Equally, the 'social' experience is understood less by trading information or communicating and more by observing – as an individual – their contribution to that collective interest. Indeed, in the mapping and visualisation of users' endeavours, MyQ2 is more advanced than many social media services, even as – in its careful control of what and to whom users speak – it is much more constrained. And, given the potential risks involved for government when websites they control might be misused by users, it is not surprising that MyQ2 is so constrained in its approach. MyQ2 represents the reality of interactive websites for government: desiring engagement, yet fearing users deviating from the requirements of successful promotion of government plans (see [9] for this contradiction discussed theoretically).

3.2 Participation in achievement not decision

Most of the recent enthusiasm for e-government has involved a call for increased citizen participation in the decision-making processes of government, recognising not only that governments have often failed to make exactly the right decision, or to create the right mechanisms for achieving outcomes based on such decision, by lacking relevant information. Citizens are seen, in such visions of e-government, as a crucial resource for both knowledge and opinion which, if not tapped, will lead governments to make either poor decisions, or decisions which do not reflect the democratic will of the people. Such views are, of course, not entirely new: indeed the advent of network communications even as far back as the 1980s was accompanied by the hope that it would improve democratic government by connecting people with the representative governments. More recently, however, the vastly greater availability of the Internet, and the fact it is an everyday part of many people's lives, has led to even more interest in the Internet's capacity to boost political participation and thus strengthen and improve democracy. MyQ2, however, takes a different

approach. The policy decisions of *Toward Q2* have already been taken. MyQ2 does not seek opinions and views to create policy: it seeks to recruit people to do things which enable the government and the state to achieve the outcomes sought in *Toward Q2*. Users of the site become effective participants in the ongoing machinery of government, rather than its overall planning.

While MyQ2 does not explicitly seek input into decision making, it is clear that in future one of the significant opportunities that the MyQ2 approach may provide is for governments to learn from the significant data collected about individual citizens' activities. If, for example, the site demonstrated a strong commitment by users to some of the ambitions but not others, future government plans could address this deficit by promoting specific campaigns around the ambitions that were not generating user engagement. Alternatively, governments could read from the data the current political mood of voters, seeing in their interest in some commitment but not others evidence which would enable a particular kind of campaign to secure re-election. Therefore, one key lesson to be learned from this approach is that decision making participation can be secured *also* by indirect means – rather than seeking to monitor attitudes, governments can use interactive websites such as MyQ2 to observe behaviours and then draw inferences about opinions of citizens. This approach may well provide a more robust form of participatory democracy than traditional approaches.

3.2 Learning through active engagement

The principal objective of government strategies for social improvement is a change in the behaviour of citizens such that the business of public administration becomes more efficient and effective. It has long been the case that public education of citizens has been required as part of the overall efforts of government to achieve change. MyQ2 represents a new kind of approach to education of this sort. While traditional media campaigns treat citizens as passive viewers or recipients of information, rather like students listening to a didactic presentation by a teacher, MyQ2 serves as a kind of student-centred active learning experience in which the array of elements, the way of accessing them, and the actions to be taken, make users pay far more attention to what they are doing and the messages they are meant to learn. According to theories of human learning [8], this kind of active construction of knowledge – in which general ideas are combined with specific individual actions by each learner that enables them to make sense of the material – is far more powerful in bringing about a change in the knowledge of those involved. Therefore, MyQ2 demonstrates the potential that the World Wide Web has for more effective forms of public education: rather than presenting users with all of the information, in a form designed by those in power, e-government that educates would be better served by engaging users in an active knowledge process in which the learners must work with the information in some manner to be able to make sense of it. Critically, MyQ2 attempts to do this by requiring users to think about the commitments they make as they actively choose them, and to provide them with the necessary information to learn about those commitments only as they are making the commitment.

4. Conclusion

There are literally thousands of initiatives being taken across both the developed and developing world to bring about a new era of governance that takes seriously the power of computer networks to link citizens, information, and government decision making and operations in new ways. In some

cases these initiatives are inspired by more deeply political ideals, seeking to engage citizens and governments in new forms of dialogue and cooperation so that democratic government can indeed be by and for the people [5]. In other cases, e-government involves more pragmatic activity, simply designed to achieve efficiency in government. In large measure, however, e-government initiatives are designed simply to improve the *direct* interaction of people and their governmental institutions – whether by improving communication between them (for example, gathering opinions to inform decision making) or by making easier and more reliable the necessary transactions by which people are governed (for example, the payment of taxes or the claiming of benefits). MyQ2, at least in prospect, suggests that there are other ways of developing e-government that builds on the growing enthusiasm of citizens to use the Internet in ways that blur the boundaries between ‘receiving’ and producing information, between consuming mass media and becoming part of personal media [7]. These ways draw on social media conventions, but reshape them to meet the specific needs of government. In doing so they both create the kind of dynamic, interactive web services which are attractive to users [4] and become part of the data-gathering machinery of contemporary government – raising similar privacy concerns to those now expressed about Facebook and other new media. They both promote interaction between citizens and government, yet also mobilise citizens in particular ways to achieve defined goals. Fundamentally, MyQ2 provides an example of the continuing contradictions of the web for government: it is both more open, more engaging and more participatory; yet this openness and participation is deployed within limits, and for particular ends that largely reinforce the ‘governed’ nature of its subjects, even as that governance provides better social outcomes for society as a whole [7].

5. References

- [1] ALLEN, M., Web 2.0: An argument against convergence, *First Monday*, Vol 13. No. 3, March 2008.
- [2] BARNES, M., J. NEWMAN, AND H. SULLIVAN (EDS), *Power, Participation and Political Renewal: Case studies in public participation*, Policy Press, London 2007.
- [3] BRUNS, A. AND M. BAHNISCH, *Social Media: Tools for User-generated Content*. Brisbane: Smart Services CRC, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane 2009.
- [4] COLEMAN, R., P. LIEBER, P., A. MENDELSON and D. KURPUIS, *Public Life and the Internet: if you build a better website, will citizens become engaged?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, New Orleans Sheraton, New Orleans, LA, May 27, 2004
- [5] ESTER, P. And H. VINKEN, *Debating Civil Society: On the fear for civic decline and hope for the Internet alternative*, *International Sociology*, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp.659-680, 2003.
- [6] GOVERNMENT 2.0 TASKFORCE, *Engage: Getting on with Government 2.0: report of the government 2.0 taskforce*, Department of Finance and Deregulation Australian Commonwealth Public Service, Canberra 2009.
- [7] LUDERS, M. *Conceptualizing Personal Media*, *New Media & Society*, Vol. 10, No. 5, pp.683-702, 2008.
- [8] NISTOR, N., S. ENGLISH, S. WHEELER, M. JALOBANU (EDS), *Toward the Virtual University: international online perspectives* Information Age Publishing, Greenwich, CT 2003.
- [9] PAJNIK, M. *Citizenship and Mediated Society*, *Citizenship Studies*, Vol 9 No. 4 pp.349-367, 2005