

UTOPIAN ASPIRATIONS AND DYSTOPIAN REALITIES

THE MANY FACES OF E-PLANNING IN NSW

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INTRODUCTION

The last 15 years have seen a rapid growth in the popularity of e-planning in Australia and internationally. In this paper I wish e-planning to be understood as a range of planning activities that are taking place online. E-planning can refer variously to the systems used to submit and track development applications online, online planning certification tools, blogs and discussion forums hosted by authorities and tools for envisioning future scenarios.

In Australia e-planning has been a subject of research by a number of authors (Khan and Piracha, 2009; Piracha, 2010 and Piracha et al. 2011). Australian local and State governments have been quick to realise the benefits of e-planning as Yigitcanlar, (2005) has shown. E-planning like many new technologies has been greeted by political optimism and is assumed to be constitutive of new possibilities (c.f. Bohman, 2004). These include greater speed and efficiency in the bureaucracy, opening up dialogue with a broader range of members of the community, and the possibility of 'tapping into' an emerging public sphere. However, while policy makers allude to the participatory and community benefits of e-planning, Khan and Piracha (2009) have argued that this is mere window dressing for e-planning's real purpose: speeding up the efficiency of the development process as part of a broad suite of neoliberal reforms to the planning system (see also Piracha, 2010). Furthermore, e-planning is dominated by the use of one-way or 'monologue communication' with communities through websites, belying its supposed participatory benefits (Piracha et al., 2011).

Recent years have seen an explosion in interest in e-planning internationally. In the UK, the Department of Communities and Local Government and the Welsh Government have funded a Planning Portal since 2002 through which it is possible to submit a development application for any local government authority in England and Wales. By the first quarter of 2010 the portal was processing 45% of all planning applications (Kendall, 2011). Researchers have also been active in this area and recent years have seen the publication of a large number of articles, special issues in Journals (e.g. Yeh and Webster, 2004; Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010), a *Handbook of E-Planning* (Silva, 2010), edited volumes (e.g. Wallin et al. 2010) and a soon to be established *International Journal of E-Planning Research*.

Because of its technical nature e-planning research has been dominated by attempts to refine the technology without questioning whether it can deliver better planning outcomes. For example, virtual reality environments with complete sensorial immersion have been crafted with little attention given to whether this will inform and therefore empower stakeholders as part of the decision-making process (e.g. Lange, 1994). Wissen et. al. (2008) assert that visualising indicators of landscape change can animate stakeholders 'to set up cause-and-effect chains' (p.194) about their environment. Similarly, Gordon and Khoo (2008) argue that the virtual world 'Second Life' offers a way to facilitate the development of a 'language of space' allowing communities to communicate their aspirations and facilitate the development of 'placeworlds', as a subset of Habermasian 'lifeworlds'. However such assertions are made without reference to implementation in a real planning system.

On the surface, e-planning throws up a number of tensions for planners and planning, especially when used in a participatory frame. Firstly, the benefits of e-planning, such as greater transparency and faster decision-making cannot always easily co-exist. If greater transparency leads to a better-informed community would this not generally slow down decision-making on development applications, especially those that were controversial? Secondly, greater transparency, may impact on existing assumptions about the role of stakeholders, planners and other public servants and their role in due process.

The purpose of this paper is to unpack and demonstrate some of the problematic aspects of e-planning. However, it is too simple to condemn the optimistic aspirations of e-planning practitioners to create a collaborative online utopia as naïve. At the same time, no one could argue with the laudable aim of increasing the transparency of any bureaucracy. Instead, the aim here is to adopt the attitude of a 'critical enthusiast' and point to a more nuanced critique of e-planning practice.

In the next section three themes from the work of the French post-modern thinker Jean Baudrillard are drawn out. These themes are then used to unpack data derived from interviews with e-planning practitioners. Questions asked of the interviewees sought to map the utopian aspirations associated with e-planning. Finally Baudrillard's work is used to reflect on these aspirations and point out how the headlong rush to attach utopian aspirations to e-planning may produce unanticipated outcomes and a dystopian reality.

Interviews with four planners involved with e-planning in a single local authority in northern Sydney were conducted between February and April 2011 (Table 1). False names were given to these respondents so that they remain anonymous. The local authority chosen represents one of the 17% of Metropolitan local government authorities (LGAs) in Sydney that allow development applications to be lodged online. It also represents one of the 12% of Metropolitan LGAs that run discussion forums on planning (Piracha et al. 2011). As such it can be considered to be forward thinking in e-planning activity. Interviews were also conducted with two senior members of staff at the Department of Planning and Infrastructure (DoPI) whose roles are dedicated to communicating planning and the strategic implementation of e-planning across the State. Finally, an interview was conducted with the principal of an online engagement company who implements e-planning systems for a range of LGAs.

The sampling strategy that was used was based on a snow-ball sampling technique. In other words, respondents were used to nominate suitable respondents to interview to expand the pool of interviewees. In addition, theoretical sampling was used. This is a process of gathering data guided by, in this case Baudrillard, themes to compare these with the emerging findings and structures from the interviews (Douglas, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Although the number of practitioners interviewed represent a small number compared to the total number who interact with e-planning, those who design, promote and fund e-planning projects are restricted to a small number of individuals.

Table 1: Interviewee roles and organisation

False name	Organisation	Role
Jo	Department of Planning Infrastructure (DoPI)	Director
Robyn	Department of Planning Infrastructure	Director
Kris	Local Government Authority (LGA)	Manager of Strategic Planning
Ming	Local Government Authority	Business Development Review Team Leader
Doan	Local Government Authority	Maintenance of the Electronic Planning System
Andrea	Local Government Authority	Community Engagement Manager
Jean	Online Community Engagement Company	Principal

THE IMPLOSION OF MEANING AND THE SILENT MAJORITY

The French post-modern thinker Jean Baudrillard provides one of the most apposite commentaries on the role of technology and the media in society. Baudrillard, self-proclaimed 'intellectual terrorist' and one of the only thinkers of the *soixante-huitard* generation to readily embrace the term 'post-modernism' has received little attention from planning theorists. Initially developing his work as a critique of Marxism's focus on the logic of production and instead developing a critique of modernism based on the logic of simulation, Baudrillard's early work provided new perspectives on everyday life in the post-War era organised around the consumption, display and use of consumer goods (Kellner, 1994). With subsequent work on the effects of new communication and media technologies Baudrillard 'blazed new paths in contemporary social theory' (Kellner, 1994, p. 1).

In the Baudrillard universe, entertainment, information and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life. Baudrillard's work has been used to unpack corporate communication and the takeover of ICTs in areas such as management and finance (Schinkus, 2008; Grandy and Mills, 2004). These papers make use of the different stages of simulation, culminating in hyperreality, where images bear no relation to reality (Baudrillard, 1991).

There are three implications of hyperreal states that are relevant for e-planning. Firstly, under a Baudrillan frame the play of images and signs produces an implosion of understood classes, subjectivities, definitions and categories (e.g. gender, class, identity, political differences etc.). Implosion goes to the centre of understanding about the subject-object dialectic in modern philosophy in which the subject is supposed to represent and control the object. In a modernist planning setting, ideas represent real events and people. Power is assumed to be transmitted in a rational and orderly way along well-defined bureaucratic structures. Under a post-modern planning setting indicated by Baudrillard's writing on implosion we would expect to see the collapse of these structures and boundaries. Subjects, such as developers, resistance groups, citizens etc. fragment and become harder to identify. Processes fragment and become organised as a series of events. In the case of e-planning, we would expect to see technology playing a role in accelerating these processes of implosion and fragmentation.

Secondly, Baudrillard attempts to counter the widely held assumption that greater information in the public sphere creates more meaning: 'the alpha and omega of our modernity, without which the credibility of our social organization would collapse. Well, *the fact is that it is collapsing*, and for this very reason: because where we think that information produces meaning, the opposite occurs' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 80, emphasis in the original). In his essay on *The implosion of meaning in the media* Baudrillard takes the provision of information as evidence of a dominating mirage in society, as a huge effort deployed to hide a lack of meaning. This flood of information results in the implosion of meaning and a destruction of the social as people become increasingly isolated through exposure to media. This runs counter to the understanding that the media's provision of information unites us in a process of socialisation, for example nation-building (c.f. Anderson, 1983). Baudrillard's chapter is relevant to e-planning because we would expect e-planning to be justified because it facilitates access to information. This could be, for example, transparency and a constant invitation to provide feedback. In that sense, e-planning can be said to 'live by a passionate idealism of meaning and of communication, by an idealism of communication through meaning...' (Baudrillard 1994, p. 83).

Thirdly, Baudrillard's essay briefly discusses the silent response of the masses to this flood of information, which is also relevant to this research. In his initial writing Baudrillard condemned the media as a mode of communication that could not be responded to. In *The implosion of meaning in the media* and subsequently in other works, he sees in the 'Silent Majority', not the results of a disengaged or apathetic public or even the results of the 'digital divide' but the results of a wily, devious resistance to being manipulated by the media (Cook, 1994). Baudrillard's counter-intuitive reasoning for the silence of the majority is relevant to this research because a frequently cited concern of planners is to downplay the opinions of a vocal minority and try to understand the opinions of the silent majority. E-planning is seen as a way of enabling this. But what if the silence were part of a strategy of disengagement by the silent majority?

While Baudrillard's conclusions can seem nihilistic or even cynical, reading this work is useful as a reflexive exercise that allows us to go beyond simple assumptions about an activity such as e-planning. In the following the aim is to use Baudrillard to uncover aspects of e-planning from the interviews that would otherwise be invisible. Because e-planning is so new and constantly evolving through technology the intention is also to read Baudrillard's work as science fiction, 'which anticipates the future by exaggerating present tendencies and thus provides early warnings about what might happen if present trends continue' (Kellner, 1994, p. 13).

E-PLANNING AS UTOPIA

'Life in Cyberspace... at its best is more egalitarian than elitist, and more decentered than hierarchical... In fact, life in cyberspace seems to be shaping up exactly like Thomas Jefferson would have wanted: founded on the primacy of individual liberty and commitment to pluralism, diversity and community' Mitch Kapor, Founder of Electronic Frontiers Foundation, [quoted in Nunes, (1995)]

Overall e-planning in NSW has tried to increase the access and availability of information and tried to increase the efficiency of planning processes. The first step towards e-planning was the development of a website known as *iPlan*. The site was officially launched in August 2002 by the Deputy Premier and Minister for Planning, Dr Andrew Refshauge who claimed that 'the Government is putting the planning system on-line'. It was funded through NSW Department of Commerce Office of Information and Communications Technology's 'connect.nsw' program and the Treasury. It was then reviewed in 2006 before being decommissioned in July 2008. While little information is currently online about *iPlan* it is possible using an internet archive service (<http://wayback.archive.org>) to view the website and various pages for <http://www.iplan.nsw.gov.au> as far back as August 2001. As the December 2003 page shows, the aspiration

of the site was to provide a 'one stop shop for planning information across government and industry'. This meant providing a centralised location for statutory planning information such as Local Environmental Plans (c.f. Yigitcanlar, 2005); and other information useful for strategic planning.

The general expectation of the site was that users would use the various data sources to map information to search for land for industry and business and cross-refer these to existing controls. The community engagement part of the website won an award from the NSW branch of the Planning Institute of Australia in 2003. This part of the site provided general information about the community consultation process. In an era before the potential of wikis and blogs was realised, it provides the user with information about the consultation process instead of allowing it to be consulted online. As a concession to a two-way mode of communication the user is invited to click on a link to a NSW 'Community Builder' series of discussion forums, whose discussion topics ranged from 'community gardens' to 'Indigenous Stress Management'. In June 2006 the number of links on the site was drastically reduced with a note inserted that it was currently under review. The site remained unchanged for the next two years before being decommissioned.

iPlan had an overly-ambitious aim to reign in and centralise information for the whole of the NSW planning system. Clearly the designers of the system underestimated the difficulty of centralising the sources of planning information scattered among the 152 local governments of NSW and putting this online. Furthermore, it may have been unrealistic to assume that centralising information was necessarily in the various stakeholders' (especially the Local Government Authorities) interests and that *iPlan* would out-compete existing modes of providing information. It is significant that in the course of all the interviews conducted for this project, no mention was made of *iPlan*, even though all participants were asked about the history of e-planning in NSW.

Although *iPlan* has been confined to history, it remains an important example of utopian e-planning. The aim of the system to be an information clearing house and therefore to transcend the existing silos, boundaries and politics of NSW planning represents the hope that greater transparency would result in better planning outcomes. An existing legacy of this period of e-planning enthusiasm was an online tool, known as BASIX, for certifying new development according to an environmental baseline. This was developed independently of *iPlan* and was given statutory weight by its inclusion as a State Environmental Planning Policy in 2004.

Despite the experiment with *iPlan* the government's enthusiasm for technology remained undiminished as can be seen in the expectations attached to e-planning in a discussion paper titled "*Improving the Planning System* (NSW DP, 2007). This was shared by the rationale for introducing a Federally-sponsored e-planning approach at the State level in 2007. This initial support was followed by a commitment to fund an e-planning project through the Federal Government's Housing Affordability Fund in 2008. It is in the context of this scheme that the following interviews and analysis should be read.

E-planning in its latest guise

The idea of a rational bureaucracy remains an important justification for practitioners of e-planning. In particular, e-planning is seen by the interviewees as a useful way of amplifying and laying bare the assumed rationality of the bureaucratic process. This, according to the interviewees is through increasing the modes of communication, increasing the universality and therefore the fairness of the system and increasing transparency and therefore the accountability of the system. This faith in the bureaucracy is a modernist concern that can be traced to Max Weber's theory of the bureaucracy in the 19th century (c.f. Jain, 2004).

Expanding the bandwidth of communication

Firstly, interviewees argued that an increasing number of communication modes are enabled through e-planning. In one interview a senior official at the Department of Planning and Infrastructure referred to prior experience of the use of ICTs in communicating the concerns of remote communities to argue that e-planning modes would be given more direct attention than traditional modes of communication:

'Hearing that firsthand, I think, through telephone link-ups and email dialogues has a far greater influence than them just sending a letter to the Minister that gets handed down to the corro [sic] unit that bother someone to do some dot points... I think we can make it a far more real experience. So I think there's a heap of potential for us'. (Jo: DoPI)

Nonetheless, it was acknowledged by all interviewees that other modes of communication remained equally relevant, as this Local Authority planner noted. 'We still get the letters on the nice notepad paper and the beautiful handwriting from Mrs Smith, who's 98 and lives in [the area]. They still come in and they're still valid and they're still part of the process.' (Doan: LGA).

More importantly expanding the bandwidth of communication through e-planning was seen as a way of countering the dominance of a small group in the community. By gathering data on the numbers who visited a site and comparing it with the number who left comments the Principal of the online engagement company was able to help the council isolate a vocal minority from the rest of the largely ambivalent community who had not voiced an opinion and reach a decision on a controversial development:

'The other 10 were absolutely angry and vehement about it [online]. The same 10 people were dominating the community meeting, were literally - not just lobbying but turning up to council meetings... It was a fairly fraught issue, but the councillors, literally, were struggling to distinguish whether this was a genuine community passion (because the people against it included some very well-heeled and politically-active individuals), or if it was just a small section of the community' (Jean, Principal).

A more consistent medium of communication

Achieving a clearer and more universal system is an overarching aspiration of the State government. In recent years the State government has pursued a variety of attempts to standardise information from the various LGAs in NSW. Most notably this has been through the gazettal of the Standard Instrument in 2006. The Standard Instrument is a legislative tool that prescribes the style and language used in local environmental plans. As the State government officials note, this trend towards standardisation is also a part of the e-planning project:

'The components of that strategy and how it would be delivered that would take us from where we are now with a rather patchy approach to planning in New South Wales, to a far more integrated state, local government systems and industry systems as the case may be'. (Robyn: DoPI)

The standardisation of information is to extend to Local Authority websites in general for example. This points to a utopian aspiration for 'total government', mediated through the website as the authoritative source of information:

'...why don't we have a [web] template that looks similar so that people can transact business similarly, no matter what local government they find themselves in, in terms of from, "here's a pothole" or "here's an issue with my library" through to "how do I get approval for my house? What do I do online to get that? What do I need to submit?". So I think there's a great deal of potential that would give people some universality and I think that's what should, hopefully, come out of e-planning.' (Jo: DoPI)

A more transparent system

Finally, transparency remains one of the most compelling reasons for adopting an e-planning system. While the respondents in this study were experienced enough to know that simply providing information was not going to be enough to provoke communication, the online engagement company principal was able to cite examples of local authorities who are not. Some:

'do engagement where they put up a site about the [Local Environment Plan] or the section whatever plan and they've actually put the plan in the [e-library] and then asked for questions: comments on chapter one, comments on chapters two to four, comments on...Yeah, they got no comments and no interest.' (Jean, Principal)

Instead, the interviewees saw these issues as technical ones that could be overcome with experience and pointed to some of the other benefits of transparency. An official in the DoPI explained their current practice with large planning projects and the convenience of using an e-planning system:

'So the public can now read what everyone has said about what might happen there. Then, when the assessment's complete, the assessment goes on the internet so that people can see whether those concerns were taken into account... It's a quiet way of bringing about a revolution in accountability, because if you can't justify the public policy position you came up with, then you shouldn't have come up with it.' (Jo: DoPI)

This statement starts with the public who are expected to benefit from transparency as engaged citizens but ends with a warning directed at disengaged decision-makers. This points to a long running concern of various levels of government to improve the quality of the decision-making process. At a minimum, transparency is expected to engender a system of passive surveillance and 'bring about a quiet revolution'. However, it is clear that an e-planning system generates data that can be used for active surveillance by the

State government to monitor local government. The State government already requires all local governments to produce an annual Local Development Performance Monitoring Report. The production of this report is sensitive, complex and time consuming, however with:

‘automated e-planning like the EHC, and the integration of these systems I hope that this requirement on local government to extract data one-off for an annual reporting system would not be required. Because it would happen by dint of just using these online systems[...] The data would be of high quality, and they could just do exports out of their online systems that are collecting the information. Potentially, not report annually, but maybe report quarterly something like that.’ (Robyn: DoPI).

In addition, local authority planners pointed to areas where e-planning could be developed to enhance the consistency of decision-making through a measure of internal transparency:

‘If there was some ability to use the system to say, well at Smith Street we had this issue, and you could create that data base of the information. [It] could assist you in looking at how you're making those decisions and assist the team leaders in ensuring they're consistent...Rather than having to rely on them getting together and talking about the things that have been important...’ (Doan: LGA)

E-PLANNING AS DYSTOPIA

Since planning is complex and operates at different levels within bureaucracies we would expect to see ways in which e-planning represents a challenge or even a dystopic scenario for the planning system. The aspirations of *iPlan* to centralise information which foundered on the *realpolitik* of local-State relations is a case in point. At a local government level e-planning may, for example, expedite the planning approvals process, make it more transparent and reduce frustration with planning as a regulatory process. At the same time, clear boundaries exist in planning between the planners (as approvers), the proponents and the wider public. The role of local authorities is structured around those boundaries and the roles that each of the stakeholders play. E-planning has the potential to usurp those roles, calling into question the relevance of existing roles and modes.

On the one hand this is recognised as a management problem as boundaries, silos and hierarchies are broken down and re-engineered according to a new ICT infrastructure. As the official in the State Government noted:

‘So while we look at e-planning and see it is a technological fix ... it is largely about business process improvement and so there is a lot of cultural change and a lot of business process mapping and analysis that would go on...’ (Robyn: DoPI)

Given the existence of this management problem and the need for an existing clear structure or process onto which an e-planning system can be mapped it is perhaps no surprise that both the local and State levels of government recognised that the code-based aspects of planning are more amenable to an e-planning approach:

‘So we looked to electrify, if you like, the New South Wales housing code State Environmental Planning Policy.’ (Robyn: DoPI)

For the local authority the development application system was the site for its initial foray into the e-planning field. Between 2003 and 2004 it built an in-house system to track online all development applications. Although the planners interviewed described it as ‘pretty crude’, it enabled members of the public to look up the application number, the address and whether it was approved or refused, or where it was up to.

Despite the enthusiasm and resources devoted by the local authority to e-planning there was acknowledgement of some of the pitfalls of using a more efficient e-planning approach. In particular, there was a perceived danger that by making the systems more efficient the personal, discretionary elements of planning would be missed.

‘We need to be always conscious of that risk of turning our planners into monkeys pushing buttons, and forgetting about that there is merit assessment. There is subjectivity and planning is not a game of numbers. Planning is an art and that is really important to maintain.’ (Kris: LGA)

However, while such issues may arise to alter and shift bureaucracies, over the long term they do not represent a significant challenge to planning. Just as the widespread introduction of GIS technology from the

1970s in local government has increased the accuracy and the knowledge in the planning system it is to be expected that 'electrifying' procedural aspects of the planning will do the same. It is when e-planning is introduced into the complex, politically fraught and discretionary area of public participation that vigilance is required to learn and reflect on mistakes and the role of technology.

'Imploding' planning

The Baudrillan theme of 'implosion' surfaces in the respondents' interviews through debates around anonymity and identity in the planning process and the role that e-planning plays in altering these. Implosion implies a blurring of understood boundaries between groups and stakeholders. It also implies a fluidity in identity as one group's identity can easily change into another. E-planning facilitates anonymous posting and debate and this can blur the boundaries between interest groups. The manager of strategic planning interviewed in the LGA saw some of the online opinions as problematic because:

'(1) you don't know who the person is, because they don't have to identify themselves. They have to identify themselves with an email address, but they may not be a resident.' (Kris: LGA)

In another case of anonymity being abused the planner noted that the online forum was being used for illegitimate political ends:

'There was a claim that staff at another council were using other council computers to access our [visioning project]. That was perceived to be a political thing.' (Kris: LGA)

The community engagement manager for the same LGA however thought that anonymity was important. In particular to encourage the voicing of unpopular opinions:

'The fear of reprisal, the fear of - that someone is going to see your personal information will deter people [...] [In the case of a major housing redevelopment] I might have thought that design was really good, but do you think I am going to send in a submission supporting it when all of my neighbours will see that [and my address]?'

Anonymity in democratic processes has a long and complex history. The contrast in these two positions represents an ongoing debate on the role of the internet in the public sphere. As Bohman (2004) puts it: 'while anonymity promotes freedom of expression under certain circumstances, it changes the expectation of communication by making the speaker and audience not only indefinite but also indeterminate in its many-to-many form.' Planning's consultation processes are premised on the existence of definite speakers and audiences linked to pre-determined issues and so it is not surprising that the planner expressed reservations about the role of anonymity in e-planning.

A more important issue arises where anonymity provokes a lack of accountability. Where this can happen antipathy and cruelty can rush in. This happened in the problematic use of an online forum to discuss the highly contentious redevelopment of a major sports stadium in the local authority. The proponents for the redevelopment were a well-known and well-funded sports club backed by a national league. The opponents to the redevelopment were a range of environmental groups, one of which was headed by a council member:

'[The stadium] is a very classic example where, it is the [club] pretty much versus the local community. Then also versus the rest of the ratepayers who may or may not want to fund what is required, the investment that is required to maintain that stadium at the level it needs to be when the State government don't seem to be wanting to spend, or the federal don't want to spend any money.' (Andrea: LGA)

This development threw up all of the expected accusations of NIMBYism and hooliganism centred on the visioning process that the council implemented, at significant cost and energy and through an independent company expressly to give the process legitimacy.

The councillor who headed up the protest group was accused of anonymously going online and trying to influence the discussion while also being a decision-maker. This was perceived to be unfair by the planners involved who saw it as an example of 'double dipping'. The only evidence that it was indeed the Councillor was that they share the same first name:

'The mistake I suspect that this person made is that they started talking like they knew too much. This person who doesn't obviously like the [club] started raising a bit of a storm.
[looking at the replies online]

This person [in a reply] was trying to identify who that person was as if they might have been an interested member of the council. But we are not allowed to do that so there is no evidence that that is the person that [Kris] thinks that might be.' (Andrea: LGA)

While the issues of antipathy and cruelty can be dealt with using a moderator the online comments reveal a certain amount of self-governance. In the absence of clear ground rules, at one point a participant notes that members of the council ought to declare their allegiance if they are on the forum at which point another member adds that local fans of the club, council members or employees and other members of community groups should declare their interest. At which point, the forum goes silent for a number of weeks.

Does producing more information in planning result in less meaning?

The utopian comments by the e-planning practitioners seem superficially to point to a desire to flood the public sphere through greater transparency as in the case of *iPlan*. However, their successful e-planning activities are in fact careful and well structured deployments of information. The openness of the medium and the invitation to 'join in on the discussion' is made in a nostalgic spirit that harks back to an anarchic pre-1998 period when the space of the internet was largely uncontrolled (c.f. Sassen, 1998 p. 194).

Baudrillard argues that media saturation produces an asocialisation of individuals. Is there a danger that e-planning will encourage the same? While it is clear that the resources of a council or even a State government could never compete with the corporate online and offline and media interests, it is possible to identify a number of danger areas for planners moving forward. Firstly, it is possible to imagine that the cheapness and availability of e-planning tools may lead to a danger of 'overconsulting' in future. In fact, the utopian aspiration that e-planning can open up new modes of communication may only be a temporary one because of its novelty. At the same time, e-planning is likely to remain a rapidly moving field because of technological innovation and because of the need for novelty. Secondly there is a danger that in bathing the community in events, online activities and discussion forums the community may in fact be unknowingly manipulated by the underlying structure of the collaborative exercise. As Bohman (2004) notes, an extraordinary amount of control can be embedded into the internet with software. More often than not this control goes unnoticed and unacknowledged. This issue of control and e-planning is a systemic one and belies the supposed 'transparency' of the system pointed to by the respondents. Finally, there is a danger that the planners may lose sight of the underlying issues in a rush to develop increasingly novel, event driven modes of e-planning. This danger however is not systemic and can certainly be countered through effective training, experience and expertise.

The silent but wily majority?

Baudrillard's silent majority was premised on univocal media's (e.g. television) use of opinion polls, and other ways of demanding to know what we want. He sees in the silence of the masses in response to this onslaught, not a passivity but an active resistance, even a revenge: 'In silence the masses disappear; their failure to respond makes it impossible to locate them to analyze them, and to manipulate them.' (Cooke, 1994 p. 153).

Baudrillard's idea of the silent majority alerts us to other reasons why communities may comprise silent majorities – beyond the assumption of the interviewees that they have not been asked. Communities may be silent in the assumption that participation makes little difference. Theirs may even be a revenge on the perceived inadequacy of the council and its processes.

There are however considerable limits to Baudrillard's hyperbolic take on the masses. As Cooke (1994) points out people use a variety of different resistance strategies to the media. Along with silence we would expect to see these proliferate as planners increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their communication using e-planning. More importantly, judgements about the success or failure of e-planning attempts are being based by the collection of data on respondents who do not presumably know that this data is being collected or how it will be used.

'if you've got a record and you can see 9000 people have come along and only 11 have taken the time to comment, you can be pretty confident that they're not outraged.' (Jean: Principal)

This is similar to the use by Google, Facebook and other companies to gather data on web visiting habits and use these to use these for advertising. In effect the community are being coerced to speak without understanding that they are.

When the community become broadly aware of this and cynical towards it remains an issue for e-planners. E-planning's use by planners to un-silence the majority may represent one strategy in a long running battle to overcome the issues that were pointed to in the interviews: engagement, legitimacy and efficiency.

CONCLUSION: HOW E-PLANNING COULD FUNCTION

This paper has attempted to unpack some of the utopian assumptions that underpin the e-planning process and has contrasted this with the e-planning reality. Respondents spoke of e-planning in modernist terms, especially when citing its role in a system to track development applications. In this way, e-planning serves to oil the wheels of the bureaucracy. When applied to a visioning or collaborative project e-planning behaves as a distortionary mirror, distorting or exaggerating aspects of the planning process. From the interviews it is clear that anonymity plays a central role in this distortion. The attitude of planners towards anonymity is an area that deserves further research. Baudrillard's writing on the connection between information and meaning and the silent majority are used to theorise other ways in which e-planning may become problematic for planners in the future.

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