
- Refereed Papers

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Introduction

In an era of communicative abundance, media and consumer practices and regulatory frameworks are undergoing considerable change. The rapid influx of digital technologies is redefining communication processes, altering media structures and operations, and transforming the availability and accessibility of information. While these developments enable new social, cultural, political and economic activities, they can also produce adverse ramifications for consumers and communities, which can be exacerbated by inadequate policy frameworks and contexts for public discourse and participation.

On 18-19 November 2013, the News & Media Research Centre (N&MRC) at the University of Canberra hosted its inaugural conference on Emerging Issues in Communication Research and Policy. The event brought together academic researchers, government officials and professionals from media organisations to analyse and critique the impact of the changing media landscape on consumers and regulatory frameworks. The conference presented an opportunity to disseminate the latest research in the field. Significantly, the involvement of media and regulatory bodies and their public interest concerns demonstrated a desire to reduce the gap between research and policy; a promising thought for the future of communication and media research in Australia.

Overall, the conference hosted nearly fifty presentations by academics from Australia and abroad, as well as government and industry professionals including the Australian Communications & Media Authority and the Intellectual Property Awareness Foundation. The speakers covered a broad range of issues and challenges in the broadcast media, internet and telecommunications fields including: the influence of mediatisation and new spaces for political discourse; digital infrastructure developments and opportunities for further connectivity, particularly in relation to mobile and public Wi-Fi prospects; new methods of media production and consumption; advancing communication practices to facilitate social inclusion amongst marginalised communities; media markets and transforming cycles of distribution and cultural consumption; and the policy and regulatory challenges associated with changing technologies, media standards, industry practice, and consumer behaviour.

The N&MRC was exceptionally pleased that distinguished international scholars delivered the conference’s keynote addresses. On the first day, Professor Peter Lunt from the University of Leicester in the UK explored the ways in which regulatory bodies appropriate audiences as consumers/citizens, and the pressure governments place on regulators to prioritise social and policy issues beyond the market of media and communication. On the second day, Professor Catherine Middleton from Ryerson University in Canada emphasised that network connectivity needs to be separated from service, and called for greater cooperation between academia, government and industry to realise opportunities to achieve public interest objectives and digital engagement. The themes in these addresses resonated throughout the conference presentations and proceedings, particularly in relation to the effects of the rapidly changing media landscape on regulatory complexities, tensions in the consumer/citizen dichotomy, and persistent challenges for social inclusion.

The papers published in these proceedings represent an overview of the issues explored at the conference and accentuate the diversity of both research topics and methodologies used in the communication and media studies field. Moreover, they reflect salient, nuanced and interrelated emerging issues surrounding policy debates, digital participation, changing media practices, media markets, and community engagement. These papers have undergone double-blind peer review, with Australian and international academics assisting in this process. The authors are the exclusive owners of the copyright for their work, and any questions about further reproduction should be addressed directly to the authors. Many thanks to all of the authors for the time and effort spent developing papers for the proceedings.

These proceedings begin with a focus on digital inclusion, with equity of participation in the digital economy a matter of intense debate and relevance for government, public policy, business and citizens.
Robert Morsillo’s paper entitled ‘A Shared Value Approach to Digital Inclusion’ epitomises this debate. Morsillo draws from a previous inclusion program implemented in the Australian telecommunications sector (Telstra’s Access for Everyone) and applies the lessons it offers to suggest the need to reconceive pricing, products, services, markets and distribution channels in the digital environment. He argues for business to play a stronger role through corporate social responsibility, with value reconceptualised in terms of both social and commercial benefits. Morsillo suggests that a national approach to digital inclusion, which emphasises shared value through collaborative relationships between governments, not-for-profits and businesses, will potentially offer improved outcomes for all stakeholders.

Following Morsillo is a paper that examines the impact of national strategies on localised digital inclusion. In ‘Enabling Sustainable Broadband Adoption in Rural Areas’, Sora Park, Man Chul Jung and Jee Young Lee present a study of the policy initiatives surrounding digital connectivity in rural locales through the South Korean Information Network Village project. The authors detail how the approach undertaken privileges the development of human capital and active participation, with long-term visions specific to each community and intended to contribute to the local economy. By tailoring such efforts to local needs, the program looks beyond access issues to encourage sustainable broadband adoption and community cohesion.

‘Harnessing the Arc-Hive’ illustrates opportunities that arise with digital engagement including the changing roles played by individuals in the construction and preservation of publicly accessible digital media content. Cat Hope, Lelia Green, Lisa MacKinney and Tos Mahoney discuss the early development of the Western Australian New Music Archive. The project intends to utilise digital technologies and crowdsourcing efforts to capture, preserve and present comparatively ephemeral creative and cultural practices as well as broader peripheral evidence of new music performance. The paper highlights how new opportunities for participation in such digital collections contribute to the changing nature of audiences, but also require navigation through both technological and copyright issues.

The proceedings then shift to matters of equity and social inclusion. Kate Holland’s paper on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) details how issues of substance are lost when debate surrounding social policy reform focuses on political conflicts. The mediated discourse and political commentary Holland explores, including insights from disability advocates, highlight that contested aspects of the NDIS – such as the influence of market ideology and how disability is conceptualised – warrant greater attention on the public agenda. Amidst such a volatile backdrop, it remains to be seen whether the NDIS will assist in improving community attitudes towards disability and creating a society in which rights for disabled people are fully realised.

Karthik Vilapakkam Nagarajan examines the influence of external pressures on the customer service and complaints handling practices of Australian internet service providers. Drawing from interviews conducted with senior executives from the consumer association, regulator, ombudsman and industry providers, the paper details how three key pressures – regulatory, customer, and competition – influenced revisions to the Telecommunications Consumer Protection Code. Vilapakkam Nagarajan suggests the need for greater understanding of these pressures amongst regulatory agencies, the consumer association and complaints authority in order to enhance services, and argues that ongoing collaboration with stakeholders is crucial to ensure consumer protection and address emerging customer service and complaints handling issues.

‘It Makes Them Streetwise’ (by Lelia Green, Donell Holloway and Leslie Haddon) provides an empirical investigation into young people’s online activities. Interviews with parents and their high school-aged children demonstrate domestic negotiations surrounding digital technologies, including the construction of digital media as educational resources, for gaming, and to engineer sociability. The paper explores nuances in narratives around the meaning and importance attributed to technology and its uses, including understandings of risk and appropriate online behaviour, and how the views of the other (parent/child) party are appreciated and accommodated. The authors report that parental engagement positively
correlates with beneficial internet use by their children, and suggest that continual conversations about the internet contribute positively to family life.

The next three papers offer quantitative insights into various media and their markets. In ‘Media and Mobile Phones in a South African Rural Area’, Lorenzo Dalvit and Larry Strelitz provide detailed findings surrounding the availability and use of broadcast media, print media, computers and mobile phones. The paper reiterates many of the inclusion debates outlined in earlier papers, and highlights that gender and generational differences as well as language and cost issues continue to influence access and use. Broadcast media dominate print sources, and there is a preference within the community for news over entertainment. Computers are rare, but mobile telephony is pervasive (as in other developing nations) and used for a variety of tasks including internet activities and economic matters. Interestingly, the authors identify strategic community sharing of both media and technology.

The following two papers draw from a research project that analyses the distribution of audiovisual fiction. In ‘Blockbusters, Franchises and the Televisionisation of Cinema’, Jock Given, Rosemary Curtis and Marion McCutcheon explore the commercial performance of movie blockbusters in the Multiplex Era of cinema in Australia. By drawing comparisons with earlier films, the paper demonstrates changing distribution strategies and compressed cycles of cultural consumption post-1980 – the findings indicate that the scale of release increased during the Multiplex Era, but the theatrical window and box office earned by the biggest films have become more concentrated. However, franchises in the Multiplex Era have outperformed their predecessors, and the authors suggest that the commercial success of this type of instalment approach is indicative of the televisionisation of cinema.

Marion McCutcheon and Jock Given then offer a connected piece entitled ‘Heads and Tails’, which analyses product sales between 2002 and 2011 in three Australian media markets: cinema box office, DVD retail, and book retail. Contributing insight through the use of both relative and absolute metrics as well as the Gini coefficient, their data indicates that books have the strongest blockbuster characteristics and that a long market tail – whereby demand has shifted from the head of the sales distribution curve to the tail – has emerged in both the book and DVD markets (but not cinema). However, the authors determine that this tail is long and thin, particularly for books, as it includes a vast number of titles selling only rarely.

Following these are two papers that reveal new directions for communication and media research including the need for approaches that enable greater examination into meaning-making processes and how they are mediatised. The first, by Kate Holland and David Pearson (‘Communicating Food Policy Issues’), explores the politics surrounding food sustainability including media representations and research conceptualisations of food issues. Set in the context of increasing concern that awareness of food system challenges is not being translated into sufficient socio-political action, Holland and Pearson identify a pressing need to investigate the social and discursive environments in which consumption practices are shaped. They highlight the role of news, popular media and key interest groups in framing food issues for public debate.

In ‘#Democracy’, Philip Pond, Angelina Russo and Jeff Lewis problematise the relationship between social media, democratic processes and the public sphere. The paper suggests that current approaches to studying political conversations on Twitter often overlook many of the complexities associated with individuals’ roles in the co-construction of meaning through deliberative discussions. Offering methodological steps for empirical investigations of the digital socio-political sphere, the authors argue that studies into digital democratic discourse need to account for perceived digital dualism as well as consider the complex relationships and communication flows created by interactivity between different technologies within the media ecology.

The final two papers offer empirical investigations into community engagement. In ‘FireWatch’, Donell Holloway and Lelia Green analyse the coordination and communication of bushfire information in the remote area of Kununurra in Western Australia. FireWatch is a mapping website used to relay satellite
information, which is undergoing redevelopment to aid usability and (following the findings of multiple bushfire inquiries) facilitate greater community participation in communication processes and decision-making. The paper highlights the problematic nature of coordinating crisis information, particularly in remote areas with fragile and variable communicative ecologies, as well as the complex relationship between community participation and government responsibility. Their interview data demonstrates that community communications provide vital local knowledge, but there is community frustration and disappointment in relation to current formal information flows, both during and in between times of crisis.

These findings parallel those in the final paper, entitled ‘Public Connection with Local Government’ (by Julie Freeman and Kerry McCallum), where citizens were also disenchanted with ineffective formal channels for involvement and felt their communities were neglected. The paper offers an account of local political participation from the perspective of citizens from the municipality of the City of Casey in Victoria. It highlights that, despite a strong desire for engagement, the local government fails to keep the community adequately informed and is largely disinterested in civic input. This situation has created a sense of disconnection from government as well as civic reluctance to further engage in local political matters.

Hosting the Emerging Issues conference in the N&MRC’s first year was no small feat and certainly would not have been possible without the broad support it received. In particular, my sincere thanks to all of the staff from the University of Canberra who assisted in getting the conference off the ground: Kerry McCallum, Sora Park, Peter Putnis, Megan Deas, and the early career academics and research students who helped out each day. In addition to people from the University of Canberra, many others played instrumental roles in the conference – helping to promote it, assisting with the peer-review process, chairing sessions, presenting research, contributing to the proceedings, and engaging with speakers in the sessions – we would not have been able to hold the event without your support and I greatly appreciate the efforts and willingness of all who were involved.

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Abstract

This paper seeks to contribute additional ideas that may foster the more equal participation of all Australians in the growing digital economy, which is the harbinger of far-reaching changes to how citizens will engage with government, business, and each other. In Australia today, with the advent of the National Broadband Network, digital inclusion is increasingly viewed as a catalyst for achieving greater equality of opportunity for socially excluded people, as well as being key to increased business productivity. The concept of shared value creation is promoted by the influential Harvard Business School as a new and superior way of framing the relationship between business and society, which encourages business to be in the business of creating social value as well as commercial value. The paper analyses a well-established Australian communications inclusion program, Telstra’s Access for Everyone, finding many features of a shared value approach such as reconceived pricing, products and services for non-users, reconceived markets that include those who may be excluded, and reconceived distribution channels in collaboration with the not-for-profit sector. The paper suggests that these elements may be applicable to the new, wider challenge of digital inclusion with a potentially significant role for business. Through a shared value approach to corporate social responsibility, more effective digital inclusion programs could be developed as part of an expanded national framework involving greater collaboration between governments, the not-for-profit sector and business, which could lead to improved outcomes for all stakeholders.

Keywords: digital inclusion; shared value; telecommunications; access; affordability

Introduction

There is increasing recognition in Australia today of the importance of the so-called digital economy, which encompasses the growing range of activities that utilise modern information and communication technology (ICT). Public policy recognition was formalised on 31 May 2011, when then Minister Conroy and the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE) launched the National Digital Economy Strategy:

The Australian Government’s aim is that, by 2020, Australia will be among the world’s leading digital economies. Ensuring that Australia becomes a leading digital economy will contribute to Australia’s productivity, maintain our global competitiveness and improve our social wellbeing … To measure our progress in realising this vision, the government has set eight ‘Digital Economy Goals’ that focus on [inter alia] the areas of online participation by Australian households. (DBCDE, 2011, p. 2)

In an update to the strategy on 12 June 2013, Senator Conroy announced a new “Digital First” plan to have the vast majority of government services entirely online by the end of 2017 (DBCDE, 2013, pp. 46-52). This probably constitutes one of the most far-reaching changes to existing arrangements, given that almost all people and institutions in Australia interact regularly with federal, state and local governments. Despite “online participation” being signalled as a key focus area in the 2011 strategy, the issue of digital inclusion or exclusion receives minor attention in the update, mentioning only the two existing initiatives – National Broadband Network (NBN) Digital Hubs and Keeping Seniors Connected (DBCDE, 2013, pp. 53-56).
An underlying assumption of this paper is that much more needs to be done to overcome barriers to online participation, particularly for the last 2.3 million (27%) households that were unconnected to broadband and 3.6 million (21%) Australians over the age of 15 who, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), did not access the internet in 2010-11 (ABS, 2011). In The Rise of the Network Society, Castells (2000) forecast that “inside the networks, new possibilities are relentlessly created – outside the networks, survival is increasingly difficult” (p. 187). Digital inclusion matters! And the remark attributed to novelist William Gibson seems again most apt to this issue: “The future is already here – it’s just not evenly distributed.”

The term digital inclusion can cover a range of fields relating to the use of digital tools to undertake beneficial economic, social, cultural and personal activities (cf. Mori, 2011; Parsons & Hick, 2008). Helsper (2012) constructs a useful model that links digital inclusion and social inclusion over these four fields. To take but one example of this digital-social relationship, namely telework, Peter Walton, CEO Infoxchange Australia, voices the imperative: “The intent there is making sure that telework isn’t just the domain of those people who already have a job, but also is a way of helping those that are currently disadvantaged or excluded in some way to participate” (as cited in Howarth, 2013). Access, of course, is a primary enabler of inclusion and the starting point for other uses, and so this paper focuses to a great extent on this basic component.

**Business and Society**

Inclusion programs that address economic and social barriers are usually viewed as the responsibility of governments, often in partnership with the not-for-profit sector. Yet, following similar movements in the United States of America and in Europe, there is a growing recognition of the role to be played by Australian business in supporting positive social and environmental outcomes through what is usually termed corporate social responsibility (Australian Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility, 2008).

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the long, rich and often controversial relationship between business and society (cf. Ashley, 2009) except to note that it has come under substantial further scrutiny following such high profile failures leading to the 2007 Global Financial Crisis (GFC). This led Porter and Kramer (2006), of the influential Harvard Business School, to conceptualise the business–society relationship as one of interdependence: “The mutual dependence of corporations and society implies that both business decisions and social policies must follow the principle of shared value. That is, choices must benefit both sides” (p. 84, original emphasis).

In the past, business spending in the social area has often been practised as philanthropy (sometimes disparagingly called cheque-book philanthropy), which might entail giving to social causes related or unrelated to business activities. Over time, business philanthropy was subjected to strategic scrutiny and gave way to the notion of community investment, which entails intentional, directed business giving in an area of the economy in which the business operates. More recently, the shared value framework seeks to create social value not so much out of giving money to causes but through what the business does in its normal day to day operations, its products and services, distribution channels and procurement processes.

This evolution of corporate social responsibility frameworks has connected social impact more closely to business impact. Philanthropy may be at arm’s length through an independent foundation; community investment may align business giving to business goals and markets; but shared value extends business products and processes into new markets in new ways that create social value. While “the development of this initial framework has been limited” (Williams & Hayes, 2013, p. 2) and notwithstanding some critical assessments – for example, “The shared value approach narrows what counts as social value and avoids the friction between business and society” (Aakhus & Bzdak, 2012, p. 231; also cf. Brown & Knudsen, 2012; Pirson, 2012) – it does challenge business in terms of its moral purpose and social impact, which cannot be separated from its core commercial activity. At its best, shared value reinforces the nexus between markets and morality that concerned Adam Smith in The Theory of Moral Sentiments: “The
fundamental Smithian insight is that we should reinforce the natural tendency to put ourselves in the shoes of others. This is surely the key to underpinning a virtuous circle of the shared value envisaged by Porter and Kramer” (Szimgin & Rutherford, 2012, p. 180).

This paper argues that business has an important and valuable opportunity to respond to digital exclusion in Australia, particularly within a shared value framework. To understand in more detail the elements of this approach an historical example of communications inclusion is analysed to seek principles and lessons that may be relevant to the new challenge of digital inclusion.

Communications Inclusion

Before 2002 the almost universal take-up of the fixed-line telephone had been supported by a relatively low monthly line rental charge, together with the abolition of security bonds and reductions in activation fees. However, the cost of calls, particularly non-local and international calling, was still relatively high and this particularly impacted businesses who were big users. Further, such a pricing regime, with low fixed but high variable components, did not align with the capital intensive nature of telecommunications infrastructure investment and the desire by owners to have a steady repayment stream that was much less dependent on variable usage such as the number and length of calls (cf. Milne, 2000).

In order to facilitate greater competition in communications services, and after formal competition and pricing reviews by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC, 2001) and the Productivity Commission (2001), a program of price re-balancing was encouraged whereby monthly line rental charges would rise but call charges would decrease. Most consumers and businesses would be better off, particularly with the passing on of productivity gains from technology advancements and the automation of manual processes. This was achieved by revising the Price Control Determination applying to Telstra Corporation Ltd (Telstra) that set caps on allowable price increases, generally with reference to the Consumer Price Index (Luck, 2010).

As part of the preparations for this process, it was realised that people on a low income could potentially be disadvantaged due to the impact of the rising minimum monthly cost of maintaining a telephone line into their home: “the lowest 20 per cent of consumers by expenditure size spend a large proportion of their bill on line-rental … and very little on other services” (ACCC, 2001, p. 99). So, the pricing review recommended that “[t]argeting of low-income groups should be based on measures of income rather than usage levels for telecommunications services” and “[t]argeted assistance or other equity measures recommended in this report should be funded through government or industry-based funding” (ACCC, 2001, p. 141). However, the government decided to place the onus of compensation on the incumbent service provider, Telstra, through a new Licence Condition, Section 22, which responded by setting up its Low Income Package and Marketing Plan, called Access for Everyone, and the Low Income Measures Assessment Committee (LIMAC) to give effect to this new regulatory requirement (LIMAC, 2003).

Telstra’s provision of a comprehensive package of concessionary products and services to people on a low income became the quid pro quo to the ability to re-balance home telephone prices for the vast majority of its customers. In a still rapidly growing telecommunications market it appeared this was a win-win-win outcome:

- Competition and productivity would increase;
- Average or larger users, including business, would benefit from lower bills; and
- Low income users would be protected and able to maintain telecommunications access.

The question considered here is to what extent this represented an early example of the creation of shared value espoused by Porter and Kramer (2011): “Companies can create economic value by creating societal value” (p. 7). The following sections analyse the Access for Everyone program against this framework.
Reconceiving Products

The first way to create shared value according to Porter and Kramer (2011) is “by reconceiving products and markets” (p. 7). Access for Everyone packaged up a range of existing products, incrementally improved some of them, and added new services targeted towards specific low-income groups. For example, Telstra’s own Pensioner Discount had existed since the early 1990s and was included in the package, but then significantly increased over time as access prices also increased. A brand new emergency relief bill assistance program was specifically developed for people in financial hardship and a messaging service for people who were homeless was built utilising an existing commercial calling card network platform (LIMAC, 2003).

This product development process was undertaken in consultation with not-for-profit organisations who represented a range of low-income groups and who became members of LIMAC. It pursued a social innovation rationale, in the sense that “social innovations often have aims that draw on notions of contributing to the welfare of society and improving social capital. Such innovations may involve using existing technology and knowledge in new ways to meet social goals” (Dawson & Daniel, 2010, p. 15). Such innovation may be incremental but it is able to leverage at the margins the substantial sunk costs of existing billing, intelligent network and customer service platforms to extend services to specific markets.

Reconceiving Markets

Extending products and services to low-income groups is usually focussed on developing countries, often referred to as the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ (BOP) model, where it is argued there are large numbers of potentially profitable customers (Prahalad, 2004). This perspective lies behind the related concept of “inclusive business” (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2008) where making profits and the alleviation of poverty are not seen as mutually exclusive processes.

However, there is some recognition that similar approaches closer to home may be just as relevant: “Inclusive business models are important regardless of country. They are important wherever the poor themselves are to be found” (Jenkins, Ishikawa, Geaneotes, Baptista & Masuoka, 2011, p. 6). Porter and Kramer (2011) make this explicit for their own domestic markets:

Similar opportunities await in non-traditional communities in advanced countries. We have learned, for example, that poor urban areas are America’s most underserved market; their substantial concentrated purchasing power has often been overlooked … The societal benefits of providing appropriate products to lower-income and disadvantaged consumers can be profound, while the profits for companies can be substantial. (p. 8)

Telstra’s Access for Everyone programs began with a focus on the lowest quintile of households by income (LIMAC, 2003), which in 2011-12 was estimated to represent 1.8 million households and 4.4 million people (ABS, 2013, Table 8). By bringing this part of the market into explicit view, investigating in depth its various and diverse segments through regular market research, and proposing new pricing, products and services to meet basic needs, the overall telecommunications market has been reconceived as a potential shared value, inclusive business opportunity.

New Forms of Collaboration

Shared value creation will involve new and heightened forms of collaboration. While some shared value opportunities are possible for a company to seize on its own, others will benefit from insights, skills, and resources that cut across profit/non-profit and private/public boundaries. (Porter & Kramer, 2011, p. 16)

In Australia the role of the not-for-profit sector is strongly recognised in the creation of social value (Productivity Commission, 2010) and Access for Everyone had such collaboration built into its
specification. LIMAC, which assesses the effectiveness of the programs, followed the precedent and form of the Telstra Consumer Consultative Councils (cf. Goggin & Newell, 2000) and consists mostly of representatives from the not-for-profit sector together with one member from a government department (LIMAC, 2011). So, while not a brand new form of collaboration, LIMAC formalised and focused engagement between Telstra and the not-for-profit sector with the social goal of communications inclusion as an explicit objective.

New Distribution Methods

Meeting needs in underserved markets often requires … different distribution methods. (Porter & Kramer, 2011, p. 8)

While Telstra itself offers some of the Access for Everyone products and services directly through its call centres, a number are distributed exclusively by a network of community organisations to their low income clients. This includes emergency relief for Telstra bills, telephone calling cards, and a virtual messaging service. Major national welfare organisations such as the Salvation Army, Anglicare Australia and St Vincent de Paul Society offer their national branch networks as distribution points. There are hundreds of smaller, local organisations that also provide these services (LIMAC, 2011). Such a grassroots, different, distribution network is in keeping with the need for efficiency and effectiveness in targeted programs.

Business Relevance

Inevitably, the most fertile opportunities for creating shared value will be closely related to a company’s particular business, and in areas most important to the business. Here a company can benefit the most economically and hence sustain its commitment over time. (Porter & Kramer, 2011, p. 15)

Access for Everyone is constructed around communications inclusion, which is closely related to the core expertise and public face of Telstra: “It’s how we connect” (Telstra, 2013). It was also closely related to the commercially important fixed telephone market, and it leveraged existing expertise and infrastructure to keep costs to a minimum.

Business Scale

Here is also where a company brings the most resources to bear, and where its scale and market presence equip it to have a meaningful impact on a societal problem. (Porter & Kramer, 2011, p. 15)

While full competition was enabled in the Australian telecommunications market from 1997, by 2001 it was still “clear that Telstra [was] overwhelmingly the main supplier of local access services … around 95 per cent” (Productivity Commission, 2001, pp. 107-108). Telstra at that time was therefore well placed to give consideration on a national scale to the potential impacts of price-rebalancing on communications inclusion, particularly given its ongoing Universal Service Obligation responsibilities for the standard telephone service.

Public Policy

Regulations that enhance shared value set goals and stimulate innovation. They highlight a societal objective and create a level playing field to encourage companies to invest in shared value rather than maximize short-term profit … First, they set clear and measurable social goals … Second, they set performance standards but do not prescribe the methods to achieve them – those are left to companies … Third, they define phase-in periods for meeting
standards, which reflect the investment or new-product cycle in the industry. (Porter & Kramer, 2011, p. 14)

Access for Everyone is determined by a Telstra-specific Carrier Licence Condition, Clause 22 “Low-income measures” (Carrier Licence Conditions (Telstra Corporation Limited) Declaration, 1997). This regulation has a number of features in keeping with Porter and Kramer’s specification:

- The regulation is goal oriented – that is, directed towards “the effectiveness of the low-income package and of its marketing” (clause 22.5.b). However, the precise social goal and its measurement is not specified. Market research was used to gauge telephone affordability and inclusion from 2002 to 2007, and did appear to confirm a significant improvement for fixed, mobile and internet over that time (LIMAC, 2007, p. 3). However, there is no data point that is specified to be the measure of success in reaching the goal of communications inclusion;
- The regulation sets a performance standard, “effectiveness”, and leaves open the methods to achieve it (i.e. the composition of the low-income package). This has led to a range of social innovations in regard to products and services; and
- The regulation provides for a phase-in period by only insisting on having “a plan for offering products and arrangements” by the start date (clause 22.1).

The major variance with Porter and Kramer’s specification is that the regulation only applies to Telstra and so does not create “a level playing field” in regard to communications inclusion responsibilities. As noted above under the section Business Scale, this may have been appropriate in 2002 given the reliance on fixed telephones and Telstra’s position in that market. However, more than a decade later, with highly competitive mobile and internet services markets becoming essential for inclusion, and with the NBN Co becoming the sole fixed access network supplier, the lack of a level playing field may now be reducing consumer choice and access. This older regulation might be contrasted, for example, with the newer requirement placed on all service providers through the Telecommunications Consumer Protections Code to have a financial hardship policy, which is an essential support for communications inclusion and provides for a level playing field (Communications Alliance Ltd, 2012).

In summary, the low-income measures initiative does appear to have many features of the shared value approach as detailed by Porter and Kramer (2011). It created value for Telstra by allowing it to re-balance its fixed line pricing. It also created value for its customers and communities by extending reconfigured, concessional, products and services designed to meet the needs of specific low-income groups. It did this collaboratively with the not-for-profit sector, which was willing to partner in a new, efficient distribution network. Finally, it was underpinned by a goal-oriented piece of regulation that allowed for ongoing flexibility in the means to achieve an “effective” outcome.

Digital Inclusion

There has been significant attention given elsewhere to improving digital inclusion, particularly in the United Kingdom. Martha Lane Fox, their high-profile digital inclusion champion, interestingly said that her “first instinct is to focus on the ‘very poor’ rather than tackle the whole range of exclusion” (as cited in Cross, 2009). The policy and practice focus in Australia is much less clear or coordinated: “Despite some efforts to address this issue, Australia still does not have a national digital inclusion plan to ensure that all Australians have the skills and opportunity to benefit from digital citizenship” (Infoxchange Australia, 2013).

While the NBN is designed to ensure the availability of a high speed broadband (HSB) connection to all households, businesses and schools, the related social goal of “Online participation by Australian households” (DBCDE, 2011, p. 2) is only a relative one: “By 2020, Australia will rank in the top five OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] countries in terms of the proportion
of households connected to broadband at home” (DBCDE, 2013, p. 53). As at December 2012, Australia ranked 18th and just below the average for fixed broadband connections per 100 inhabitants (OECD, 2013). Distinct from the standard telephone service, there is no specific regard for people on low incomes, or people who face other barriers to inclusion. Retail competition is seen as the primary policy driver for affordable broadband (Conroy, 2012).

Further, while the NBN connects physical premises to HSB services, “[a]ny operationalization of access to ICTs should go beyond having some kind of access somewhere [to] incorporating aspects like quality, mobility, and ubiquity” (Helsper, 2012, p. 411). Such mobility and ubiquity of access in Australia is being left to private providers through commercial wireless data networks and the retail market for personal computers, laptops, smartphones and tablet devices. In the telephony world public policy involved itself in all three areas of access: quality (through technical standards for the standard telephone service), mobility (through payphones) and ubiquity (through accessible devices). In the NBN world only the first component, quality of fixed access, is being addressed. This is still reflected in the telecommunications assistance provided to people on certain Commonwealth income support payments (who are not eligible for the Pensioner Supplement), which, while paying a higher rate for people with an internet connection, is still restricted to those who have a home internet connection (Department of Human Services, 2013).

Benefits of Digital Inclusion

With the advent of the NBN there has been some assessment of the potential benefits of digital inclusion, including through telework (Colmar Brunton Research & Deloitte Access Economics, 2012), for small business and the not-for-profit sector (Allen Consulting Group, 2011), and for the economy more generally:

The benefits a business enjoys from increased household connections are largely realised in two ways. The first is the reduction in a business’ cost to serve. This includes the costs associated with sales and service, logistics, packing and shipping, marketing and advertising and customer acquisition and retention … Additionally the Internet expands a business’ potential market. (Allen Consulting Group, 2010, p. 17)

And, in regard to the not-for-profit sector:

Notably, because many organisations in this sector service populations that are relatively disconnected – such as those in regional areas, the elderly and low-income groups – the gains here are likely to be quite significant. (Allen Consulting Group, 2010, p. 20)

Service organisations who have large-scale, regular customer communications and transactions, such as the energy, water, telecommunications, insurance, banking, superannuation, professional and peak association industries might find substantial cost savings through more efficient online communications, invoicing, billing and payment arrangements. Not-for-profit organisations might also benefit from increased levels of engagement from their staff and their communities, with consequent improved service effectiveness (Morsillo, 2011).

A Shared Value Approach to Digital Inclusion

Such an approach will seek a beneficial social impact (i.e. the reduction of exclusion) from what business (and government) is doing in the online world. While recognising that digital inclusion is a much more multifaceted issue than communications inclusion (or access) as discussed above, consistent with the approach the following initiatives might be suggested:
- **Reconceiving products** – a focus by all organisations on accessible or universal design for information and transaction websites, and mobile apps that are made user-friendly for excluded groups.

- **Reconceiving markets** – a focus on the most digitally excluded groups in Australia such as people on a low income, people with disability, seniors, and culturally and linguistically diverse groups, particularly new arrivals.

- **New distribution methods** – a focus on collaborative partnerships with the not-for-profit sector as a channel to improve digital literacy amongst excluded groups.

- **Business relevance** – a focus on shared value by business (and by government-controlled entities) that may allow productivity benefits gained through online migration to be shared with constituencies who remain excluded, rather than simply consolidated as savings. For example, the Department of Human Services might choose to offer inclusion programs that are funded by savings from its online services; the Department of Health could do the same in regard to e-health services for seniors. National businesses that are encouraging online customer service might offer inclusion programs targeted to excluded groups of customers. A current example of this is Microsoft’s software support for the supply of refurbished computers to people on a low income (Microsoft Australia, 2013).

- **Business scale** – now that it is becoming the sole national provider of fixed telecommunications infrastructure, NBN Co could perhaps be encouraged and enabled to consider its own corporate social responsibility towards excluded groups. This could take the form, for example, of a re-examination of the entry-level service construct and the potential for marginal cost pricing targeted to such groups.

- **Public policy** – in the National Digital Economy Strategy important measures such as online participation and engagement could be strengthened by relating them to national social inclusion ambitions rather than just international comparisons, thus driving more locally significant programs to achieve them.

The challenge for business and others is to recognise, accept and measure the value that may arise from corporate social responsibility initiatives. Usually these responsibilities are seen only as a commercial cost, rather than in terms of an opportunity (cf. Blackman, 1995). Unfortunately, the low-growth, budget deficit economic environment post-GFC means business and government productivity is generally focussed on cost savings with any value generated being appropriated or consolidated.

However, evidence suggests that if just a few substantial Australian industries, with national coverage, together with all levels of government, took up the mantle of improving digital inclusion, then the benefits to themselves would be large and positive (Allen Consulting Group, 2010). Using a shared value approach would mean partnering with organisations, such as the not-for-profit sector, which are able to reach excluded groups. It would also mean sharing some of that potential value creation with disadvantaged users so that barriers to online participation might be lowered.

**Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the principle of shared value creation was alive and well some time before it gained prominence through Porter and Kramer (2006). Further, the adjunct concepts of inclusive business and social innovation are also useful in thinking about inclusion, specifically communications inclusion and potentially digital inclusion. At a time when it was feared that certain segments of the Australian population might drop off the telephone network due to the liberalisation of telecommunications markets, government, the incumbent industry participant and the not-for-profit sector joined together to support and maintain a focus on communications inclusion. This shared value framework for telecommunications access and affordability appears to have been sustained and successful in improving social inclusion.
The NBN induced reconfiguration of existing telecommunications and media market structures, and the rapid rise of the digital economy poses a similar but wider challenge in regard to digital inclusion. Yet presently there appears to be no national focus on solving this issue for those who remain excluded. There is significant value for governments in the areas of health, education and employment of having citizens utilise online services. There is significant value for businesses through lower transaction costs and increased market addressability when customers engage online, and there are employment efficiencies to be gained through telework. There is significant productivity and innovation value for the not-for-profit sector through raising the levels of staff and client online engagement. Finally, there is significant value created for individuals through cost saving and access to services (A.T. Kearney, 2009).

The challenge is to join the various value dots, and create the virtuous circle of increasing business and social value. This may require an expanded national framework involving greater collaboration between governments, the not-for-profit sector and business, perhaps similar to the Go On UK collaboration (2013).

As previously argued, digital inclusion matters. Its value must be shared.

*Disclaimer and disclosure*

Any views or opinions expressed in this research paper are solely those of the author unless directly referenced.

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Enabling Sustainable Broadband Adoption in Rural Areas

A Case Study of Information Network Villages in South Korea

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Abstract

Due to distance and low density, rural areas are often disadvantaged in getting access to telecommunication infrastructures. Hence rural digital divide policies tend to focus on providing access. While narrowing the access gap has been largely effective in developed countries, it is what happens after getting access that is more important than connectivity itself. Connectivity must be followed by effective utilisation of the technologies in order for it to be beneficial to individuals and communities. This study examines South Korea’s Information Network Village (INVIL) project as an exemplary policy of sustainable broadband adoption in rural areas. The program was designed to narrow the digital divide between urban and rural areas, create new sources of revenue and to build sustainable rural communities. Due to this multi-layered and long-term approach, the villages have been successful in narrowing the digital divide, not only in terms of access but also in effectively utilising broadband to enhance the local economy and build cohesive communities. The outcome of the program was evaluated based on the policy framework. Then a case study of three INVILs was conducted to provide an in-depth assessment of the program’s outcome. The unique feature of the program is that it emphasises investment in human capital rather than infrastructure and includes a long-term vision for each local community. This motivates local residents to be active participants in the program. Beyond the provision of high-speed networks, continuous programs that are tailored to local needs are necessary in order to facilitate sustainable broadband adoption.

Keywords: digital divide; ICT; South Korea; digital policy; rural issues; Information Network Village program

Introduction

We live in an information society where the ability to engage in various social and economic transactions is becoming a distinct advantage. Governments, companies and individuals are increasing their online presence, and those who do not have access to, or the capacity to utilise the resources are experiencing a new type of social exclusion; namely, digital exclusion.

Laying telecommunications infrastructure in rural areas is economically less viable because of distance and low density. Thus the digital divide between urban and rural areas has always been a policy issue. In countries like South Korea, rural areas overlap considerably with agricultural and fishery communities, which have been identified as disadvantaged groups in terms of both social and digital exclusion. The provision of broadband in rural communities is an initial step towards overcoming the digital divide. However, access alone does not guarantee beneficial uses. Effective uses must follow, in order to result in
user benefits. Rather than the notion that providing access will bridge the gap automatically, we need to address the issue of effective uses (Gurstein, 2003). Beyond connectivity, there must be content available to users and users need the capacity to use it appropriately.

The concept of the digital divide cannot be described merely in terms of connection or access but needs to incorporate the rift between those who use the technologies effectively and those who cannot (Barzilai-Nahon, 2006; Middleton, Veenhof & Leith, 2010; Selwyn, 2003, 2004; Sourbati, 2009). It can be understood as a question of quality of use and extent of digital engagement (Tsatsou, 2011). The broadband network is not just another telecommunication infrastructure but an ecosystem that includes networks, services, applications and users. Internet or broadband connectivity can be positioned within the broad informatization process of using communication technologies to further a country’s development into an information society (Rogers, 2000). Policies that address ubiquitous access or provision of services are only one part of the whole process.

In terms of access to the technology, South Korea has largely been successful in closing the gap between urban and rural areas. However, the second-order effects of being able to skilfully use the technologies still have not been resolved (Moon, Hossain, Kang & Shin, 2012). According to the digital divide index, the gap between agricultural/fishery groups and the general population was the largest among various disadvantaged groups, especially in terms of quality of internet use (National Information Society Agency (NIA), 2012).

South Korea’s Information Network Village (INVIL) program is an exemplary government policy that enables sustainable broadband adoption in rural areas. The program aims primarily to improve financial gains of the communities through broadband connectivity but it also has an important component of building sustainable communities. This paper examines how the INVIL program has led to sustainable broadband adoption in rural areas.

Closing the Gap in Rural Communities

Due to distance and low density, rural areas are usually not viable for private companies to invest in telecommunication infrastructures. However, the benefits of the investment in rural areas are greater as a whole compared with any other region. This obvious disparity between internal rate of return and external rate of return is usually the rationale for subsidising rural infrastructure (Parker, 2000). Laying the infrastructure may not generate immediate profits but it results in externalities such as consumer welfare and productivity.

Investing in infrastructure in rural areas usually has a positive economic impact (Katz & Suter, 2009). For example, a study found that providing small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) with broadband increased internet adoption and usage by creating user demand through the workplace. In effect, it diffused the technology into the surrounding communities (Hollifield & Donnermeyer, 2005). Networks can also help businesses create value. Steinfield, LaRose, Chew and Tong (2012) analysed 333 rural businesses and found that information and communication technology (ICT) adoption had enhanced the region’s social capital by linking local businesses to form clusters. Atasoy (2013) examined the changes that occurred in the labour market and found that broadband availability raised employment more in rural areas compared with the urban counterpart. Broadband networks link isolated areas with the rest of the market, which can help farmers reach out to areas beyond their own locale. A study conducted in rural America found that wage and salary jobs, as well as the number of proprietors, grew faster in areas with broadband access. Furthermore, broadband is known to increase community engagement and enhance the provision of health and educational services (Stenberg, Morehart, Vogel, Cromartie, Breneman & Brown, 2009). Such empirical evidence supports the hypothesis that rural economies can benefit from broadband connectivity.
Nonetheless, digital divide policies in rural areas are not always successful due to the complex nature of rural development. Lack of community participation and engagement has been identified as one of the major impediments (Kumar, 2012). Sometimes, connectivity can help rural residents to find urban jobs online and can result in deprivation of human resources in rural areas. While this increases an individual’s opportunity, it does not benefit the rural community as a whole (LaRose, Gregg, Strover, Straubhaar & Inagaki, 2008). Furthermore, information-related development projects in the agricultural sector often result in benefiting the information sector and not the farmers, which then results in an increased inequality (Flor, 1993).

Infrastructure is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition for rural growth (Malecki, 2003). Provision of connectivity must be followed by sustainable adoption. According to LaRose, Strover, Gregg and Straubhaar (2011), government subsidised broadband adoption programs do not assure an increase in broadband adoption. However, public education campaigns do stimulate broadband adoption beyond the infrastructure investments. This applies to rural residents in particular since they often lack the necessary skills to fully utilise digital technologies (Strover, 2001).

Information Network Villages (INVIL)

The INVIL project is an internationally recognised public policy program of South Korea that won first place in the 2011 United Nations Public Service Award in the category of ‘Fostering participation in policymaking decisions through innovative mechanisms’ In 2001, the Ministry of Public Administration and Security (MOPAS, previously the Ministry of Security and Public Administration) launched the Information Network Village program with 21 INVILs across the country. The goal of the program was to narrow the gap between urban and rural areas “by increasing availability of e-government services and to increase income level of local residents by boosting regional economy through e-commerce, which eventually leads to the improvement of the quality of life in rural communities” (INVIL Central Agency, 2013, p. 11). By 2013, 361 INVILs were operating across in all of the nine provinces, funded by the central and provincial governments. The principle of the program is that anyone should have access to information regardless of occupation, age and location.

The uniqueness of the policy lies in its approach. First of all, it is a joint program that involves both the central and provincial governments. While the central government oversees the program nationally and provides the initial funding to set up the villages, the provincial government selects, manages, reviews and provides continuous support. This way, the villages are set up systematically while allowing each village to build upon its own strengths and needs in the long run. Second, instead of investing heavily in the infrastructure, the program emphasised the participants’ actual benefits. By involving the provincial government in the selection and maintenance of the villages, local communities can fully benefit from the program. Third, it is not set up as a one-time grant but is an ongoing program. For example, in each village, full-time INVIL managers are employed to help the villages build their websites and keep the training programs running. This is to create user demand and adapt to changing local needs so that user-based innovative uses of broadband may be facilitated in the villages.

An evaluation of the INVIL program conducted in 52 villages in Gangwon-do suggests that there were significant economic gains. The revenues of the villages were 827.5 times higher in 2010 than in 2001 (Whang, 2012). The main factors contributing to revenue increase were the websites and knowledge sharing among community members (Jeong, Koo & Lee, 2010). While empirical evidence clearly shows the economic gains, there must be a more nuanced evaluation tool that includes not only financial benefits but also enhancement of communities and user skills. Eight evaluation items were proposed through an analysis of a survey of INVIL participants: information education, infrastructure, information use, participation of residents, autonomy of village, increase in income, village promotion and quality management (Whang, 2012).
The community has always been at the centre of the INVIL program. The commitment of local residents is a major component for the establishment of INVIL. Their participation is crucial to the maintenance of the program. Participation could be in the form of online engagement, training or other economic activities generated by the program (Kang, 2009).

Research Method

This study examined the outcome of the INVIL program against the policy framework adopting a case study approach. The INVIL program is an integrated policy that aims to narrow the digital divide by not only providing access to broadband but also sustainable outreach programs in the long term. The main policy goals were narrowing the digital divide between urban and rural areas, creating economic benefits, and building sustainable communities. We analysed the overall outcome of 361 INVIL programs and also conducted an exploratory case study of three successful villages: Mosan Onion Village, Baekmiri Village, and Gaemideul Village.

The data was collected using three different methods: public government documents, Information Village Network websites and interviewing the INVIL program co-ordinator at MOPAS as well as INVIL managers of Mosan, Baekmiri and Gaemideul Villages. Multiple sources of data were sought in order to validate the results and minimise any bias. In policy research the case study approach is especially relevant because of the complexity and unpredictability of the policy outcome (Liu, 2012).

The benefits of telecommunication services in rural areas are difficult to measure empirically. Policies that focus on increasing tele-density do not capture the social or economic impact (Ramirez & Richardson, 2005). In order to effectively assess the policies, Ramirez and Richardson (2005) propose four dimensions that are important in measuring the impact of telecommunications in rural communities: infrastructure, services and applications, awareness, and skills. Liu (2012) proposed an analytical framework to assess the effectiveness of agricultural ICT policies. The main components of the framework are to examine connectivity and content, each containing both supply and demand-side perspectives. The concepts used in the framework are infrastructure, affordability (sustainability), quality and knowledge. In this study, sustainable broadband adoption is used as a key concept in evaluating the outcome of the policy implementation. Emphasis is placed on the continuous funding for support, training and sustaining communities.

The impact of broadband is very difficult to ascertain because the technological deployment usually occurs concurrently with economic development, making it impossible to determine cause and effect. There is also the problem of spill-over externalities and effects that occur in the long run, which makes it hard to measure the tangible outcomes (International Telecommunication Union, 2012). A case study approach is adopted in order to qualitatively assess the program’s effectiveness, not only in terms of tangible outcomes but also to possibly capture externalities. The following sections provide a descriptive analysis of the policy framework, assessment of the outcomes based on the framework and details of the case study.

Assessing the INVIL Program

As of June 2013, among the 394 INVILs that were established since 2001, 361 were actively operating. The majority, 247 villages (68%), were launched in the first five years of the program. This reflects the policy framework of first laying the infrastructure and then sustaining the uses. Except for four villages that are urban villages that aim to build local communities, most INVILs are designed to generate income, mostly from e-commerce and tourism (Whang, 2012). The cost of setting up one INVIL is approximately $3 million. (Throughout this paper, 1,000 Korean Won (₩) converts to 1 Australian Dollar ($) in all dollar figures.) In 2013, the central government budget for INVILs was $5 million, of which 30% was allocated to salaries of INVIL managers. The central and provincial governments contribute to the
maintenance of the villages. While the proportion varies by area, the provincial governments are increasingly taking up a larger role.

**Narrowing the Digital Divide**

In each INVIL a village information centre is established at the onset of the program, where computer facilities are set up. Table 1 shows the increase in computer and internet use among village residents compared with other rural areas, indicating a reduction of the digital gap. In 2000, before the INVIL program was launched, the average computer penetration in the selected villages for the INVIL program was 37.3%, and internet usage 9.1%. In 2008, after the INVIL program was introduced, the average jumped to 72.1% and 66.5% respectively, which is higher than the national average agricultural/fishery statistics.

This increase was enhanced by various educational programs organised by the INVIL manager. In the early stages of INVIL most of the training programs focus on basic computer use but, once the village is established, setting up e-commerce sites, online marketing, system operation and online finance become more popular among village residents. In 2001, there were about 15,000 trainees in the program. This increased to 400,000 in 2012.

The central government trains all INVIL managers every year, so that they can provide customised support to local community members. For example, in 2012 MOPAS held more than 20 training sessions for INVIL managers in nine locations. The provincial government also runs their own re-training programs. As a result, most INVIL managers have the opportunity to get professional training at least twice a year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer penetration</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
<td>60.8%</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet usage</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Narrowing the access and usage gap (2011)
Sources: NIA (2012a, 2012b); INVIL Central Agency (2013)

**Productivity and Profit Gains**

As an effort to systematically enhance economic gains, MOPAS set up two central websites: one for selling local produce and the other for selling travel packages. They provide consulting services to rural farmers to help them develop new products, services and marketing tools. Revenue from the two online malls in 2006 was $3 million, which increased to $40 million in 2012. During the same period, the average revenue per village increased from $11,000 to $114,000. In 2012, there were 1.1 million INVIL online shopping mall visitors and 176,181 purchases were made through the site. INVIL travel package visitors reached 310,000 and 38,443 purchased travel packages from the site (Figure 1).

The INVIL online shopping mall has sold more than 11,000 different types of products to date. Most of them are locally produced agricultural products. The most popular products in 2012 were green apricot jelly (Jeonnam Gwangyang ‘Maehwa Village’), wild honey and apples (Miryang ‘Ice Valley Apple Village’; Yeongdeok ‘Peach Village’). While selling local produce to consumers in other areas can help local farmers in terms of revenue, the flow is outbound. In contrast, various tourist packages can bring travellers from other areas into the local community, which has externalities such as boosting local
businesses and building a sense of community among the members. There are 348 different INVIL travel packages ranging from farm-stay, weekend farming and bed-and-breakfast. Popular packages include ‘making cheese’ at Imshil Cheese Village, ‘trout catching’ at Jeongseon Baekdu Village and ‘clam digging’ at Hwaseong Baekmiri Village.

**Figure 1** – Revenues from e-commerce and tourism (unit: AU$1,000)
Source: INVIL Central Agency (2013)

### Building Sustainable Communities

In each INVIL, a committee consisting of approximately 15 local members oversees the programs and promotes activities to local community members. It is difficult to quantify the outcome of building sustainable communities. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a variation in how INVILs can help sustain rural communities.

One example of how local communities utilised the internet to build communities is the development of a video conferencing program for marriage migrants. A video conferencing tool translated into seven different languages was set up to help immigrant women maintain links with relatives in their home countries and in other areas scattered around South Korea. Marriage migrants are on the rise in rural areas but, due to language barriers and lack of digital literacy, they are often marginalised in their communities. Digital literacy programs for marriage migrants in multiple languages are run in many of the INVILs to help marriage migrants learn the technology more effectively. Due to the online conferencing application and training, immigrant women are now able to communicate with their family around the world.

Another example is how INVILs can strengthen the connection between intergenerational urban and rural family and relatives. There is no doubt that there is an influx of city travellers to INVIL areas, which helps local businesses to thrive. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are other subtle changes. Families who visit their extended families in rural areas extend their stay longer than before, knowing that INVIL centres can provide high quality internet access, equivalent to the facilities back in their city. They no longer think that the rural village is a remote and unfamiliar place. They come and stay comfortably for extended periods of time. The perceived distance between urban and rural areas has somewhat been narrowed.
The Case Study

Among the 361 villages, Mosan Onion Village, Baekmiri Village and Gaemideul Village were selected as the cases, each with a slightly different focus. In 2012, Mosan was the village with the highest e-commerce revenues, while Baekmiri generated the highest tourist package income. Gaemideul adopted a combined approach of having both e-commerce and tourism components in their program, and has been awarded the best village prize for three years in a row by the government. The purpose of this case study is to assess the program using both qualitative and quantitative measures (Table 2).

Mosan Onion Village

Mosan started the INVIL program in 2003 and launched their e-commerce site in 2006. As of 2013, 43% of households participate in selling their products online. The main products they sell online are onion extract and peeled garlic, both very popular products in South Korea. This generated an average of $4,700 extra revenue a year per household participating in the INVIL program. Each year, around 400-500 consumers of the online products visit the village to participate in harvesting the original produce. The economic growth was followed by active participation of the village residents. INVIL households convene once a month to discuss any management issues of the program. Among INVIL participants 74% are over the age of 60, which is a similar trend in most agricultural villages. In this particular community, this coupled with the fact that the village participated in the INVIL program early on (in 2003) makes sustainability a problem. Computers at home have not been replaced since then and internet usage has not improved. Nonetheless, having regular visitors from outside the village has enabled a more vibrant and lively village atmosphere.

Baekmiri Village

Baekmiri is a fishery village nominated as an INVIL in 2008, where 54% of the households participate in the program. The participants have a high PC penetration rate (over 90%) and high internet usage rate (over 90%). The types of tourism packages they have developed are mainly clam/crab catching. Since 2009, the average annual revenue increase has been 176%. 150,000 tourists visited this village in 2012, most of them from the Seoul metropolitan area. In addition to direct revenues incurred by tourist package programs, indirect revenues resulting from tourists’ spending on local produce amount to approximately $7.8 million per year. The tourist package is seasonal, running from May to November, freeing the other months for ICT training. During the non-tourist season, INVIL participants received an average of 5.7 ICT trainings per year. The new business model of drawing tourists to the village where participants are required to take part, as well as the frequent interaction through training sessions, have provided the village residents with a sense of community.

Gaemideul Village

Gaemideul is a typical farm village, the main produce being organic chilli peppers and bonnet bellflowers, both very popular Korean vegetables. About one-third – 36% – of the households participate in the INVIL program and are very active in getting regular ICT training. On average, INVIL participants attend about 70 training sessions per year, which is a very high figure compared to other villages. The main products they sell online are peppers and corn. Their tourist packages include trout fishing, making rice cakes and bicycle hiking, which were carefully designed to attract urban residents. Revenues increased by 103% per year after the launch of the program. While there has been some tension between INVIL and non-INVL households as well as complaints about noise and litter generated by tourists, the overall evaluation of the village residents is positive. The village’s association had three aims for the community: restoring the community, enhancing the sense of pride and increasing income. As an INVIL recipient in 2009, they have been largely successful in realising these goals.
Table 2 – Summary of outcomes in the three villages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of village</th>
<th>Mosan Onion</th>
<th>Baekmiri</th>
<th>Gaemideul</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business model</td>
<td>E-commerce</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>Combined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INVIL launch year</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of households (population)</td>
<td>220 (350)</td>
<td>130 (370)</td>
<td>39 (88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of households participating</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informatization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer penetration (%)</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>More than 90%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet usage (%)</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>More than 90%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average ICT training frequency per INVIL participant per year</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic gains</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average annual income generated by INVIL per household (2012)</td>
<td>A$4,700</td>
<td>A$5,300</td>
<td>A$39,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average increase in income per year since the start of INVIL</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>176%</td>
<td>103%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustaining communities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of website visitors in 2012</td>
<td>34,000</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>51,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of tourist program participants in 2012</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>28,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in the village after INVIL</td>
<td>Increase of visitors from other areas and active participation in communal activities</td>
<td>Formerly marginalised residents now have a new source of income and are actively participating in communal activities</td>
<td>Regular gatherings at ICT training sessions enabled members to discuss community issues with each other more frequently</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

The success of the INVIL program can be ascribed to its unique approach in building sustainable broadband adoption. First of all, the INVIL program can be differentiated from any other government intervention programs that address the digital divide in rural areas in South Korea. Unlike previous programs, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs’ ‘Digital Lounge’ program or Rural Development Administration’s e-commerce grant that limited the funding to 1-2 years, INVIL provides systematic support after setting up the infrastructure. This emphasis on continuity and not on infrastructure is one of the reasons why INVILs are sustainable. Second, most projects developed under the INVIL program have an inbound strategy that brings people into the villages, if not in person, through their website. All INVILs share the ultimate goal of building communities. It is not merely adding a layer of information technology to existing villages but a constant effort to enhance the sense of community by utilising the INVIL centres as a central location within the village. INVIL members actively participate in the projects. This is facilitated by each INVIL’s manager who is hired not only to operate the centre but is given a significant role of monitoring, educating and connecting people within the community.

The digital divide is not simply a binary divide between ICT haves and have-nots. Rather it should be understood as varied degrees of multiple layers of digital disadvantage. While the INVIL program is
largely a successful policy due to its sustainable nature, there are still issues surrounding the rural and urban digital divide that must be addressed. First of all, a second-level digital divide may be occurring at various levels. Even in INVIL areas, the urban-rural divide has not completely disappeared. While the recipients have benefited greatly from the government support, the development of broadband technologies in urban areas is not static, meaning that they would also have experienced growth. Thus programs such as INVIL need continuous re-evaluation and re-design, in order to fully embrace the developing technologies. Second, another possible area of the second-level digital divide is that there may be a rift within the community between those who participate in the INVIL program and those who do not. Policies implemented to bridge the digital divide usually have an ultimate goal of benefiting all individuals. INVIL programs are effective in enhancing communities as a whole but there may be individuals who are not fully part of the picture. Currently there are no statistics to support this argument, which needs further attention in future research. The third area where the second-level digital divide may occur is that there may be a widening gap between rural areas across the nation. There are some areas with largely successful INVILs and there are areas with not-so-successful INVILs. Furthermore, there are non-INVIL areas where there is no ongoing support. This, again, is not supported by empirical evidence and needs further investigation.

This study examined the overall outcome of the INVIL program with the emphasis on the policy framework of narrowing the digital divide, increasing economic gains and sustaining communities. Three exemplary cases were examined to provide an in-depth account of how INVILs can help sustain rural communities. The analyses show that efforts to bridge the digital gap can be successful by identifying local communities’ needs and providing continuity in support. Further comparative analysis of villages that have been successful and those that have not may shed light on the common elements of sustainable broadband adoption in rural areas.

References


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Harnessing the Arc-Hive

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Abstract
This paper addresses the construction of archival collections through the use of public support and volunteer labour. It examines the requirement of a new archive to engage with consumers and participants to achieve its desired outcomes. The Western Australian New Music Archive (WANMA) is a research project involving music advocacy organisation Tura New Music, the State Library of Western Australia, ABC Classic FM and the National Library of Australia. It seeks to collect and make accessible, in digital form, new music associated with Western Australia from 1970 to the present day. WANMA will also create new performance pieces for inclusion within the archive. The collection is currently in its formative stages but builds upon a seeding project which involved the digitisation of Tura’s archives. This made visible the fact that much public experience of new music is as a comparatively ephemeral and experimental art form, and many traces and recollections of iconic and everyday performances need to be collected soon if they are not to be lost entirely. Alongside the technological and copyright challenges facing such an enterprise, WANMA seeks to engage with musicians and music lovers who might have materials of interest for the archive which can be digitised and then returned to the original owners. Such materials include, but are not limited to, recordings. Indeed, they encompass all conceivable peripheral artefacts of new music in Western Australia, from performance programs through to letters describing a concert, through to individuals’ memories. Such a project needs to engage with, and fire the imaginations of, audiences past and present.

Key words: crowdsourcing; music archive; music digitalisation; new music; Western Australian New Music Archive

Introduction
The Western Australian New Music Archive (WANMA) is an outcome of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project that unites the efforts of Tura New Music, the State Library of Western Australia (SLWA), Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) Classic FM and the National Library of Australia (NLA) to create an archive of Western Australian (WA) new music from 1970 to the present day. The project recognises both the importance and the challenge of continuing to build and enrich this archive with the incorporation of a range of new recordings, to be performed and broadcast as part of ABC Classic FM. The project might seem to be a somewhat esoteric activity, involving a group of musicians who might between them constitute a comparatively select community of practice (Bettiol & Sedita, 2011) over the past 40 years or more, but that is to underplay the capacity of an archive such as this to inspire and engage the public in its creation and use. For the archive aims to capture not simply the music and the musicians’ input, but also the peripheral evidence of the impact and reception of the performance of new music in Western Australia over the past four decades.
WANMA is the first project of its kind and scope in Western Australia. There has been no new musical investigation or database with an exclusive Western Australian focus, in the state or beyond it. While there have been two major music archive projects based in Western Australia – The University of Western Australia’s Callaway Centre’s 2003 Preserving Australia’s Sound Heritage (PASH) project, cataloguing a collection of Australian music recordings and manuscripts donated to the university by Japanese philanthropist Dr Haruhisa Handa, and the 2005 Sound Footings project, which collated, catalogued and digitised the Eileen Joyce Collection of international piano music, recordings and paraphernalia – neither focuses on Western Australian music specifically, and both are determined by the beneficiaries’ collection.

In addition to PASH, the University of Western Australia’s Callaway Centre contains many important Western Australian new music recordings, scores and collections, and there is also a comprehensive Meta Overman collection. Yet these collections remain within the university, largely uncatalogued and with limited accessibility to the public.

WANMA plugs a gap in existing collections of new music, which have generally overlooked the Western Australian scene, even though it is acknowledged to be one of the most fertile incubators of this art form. The Western Australian government, for example, has allocated significant recognition to the field with both the 2008 Ignite! project and the establishment of the Department of Culture and the Arts Contemporary Music Fund. Some other states have subsequently imitated these initiatives. Very few archives outside Western Australia hold examples of WA new music. Where such resources are available, however, WANMA will point to these and link them through to the pieces held in its collection.

Currently, the only accessible repositories for new Australian music are: the Australian Music Centre (AMC) collection (limited by the fact it only represents its members); the National Film and Sound Archive, which has very few Western Australian materials (V. Plush, personal communication, 2010); the National Library of Australia’s Music Australia service; the Facility for Digital Preservation and Access to Endangered Language and Music from the Asia Pacific (PARADISEC); and the Music Council of Australia’s Music in Australia Knowledgebase. None of these have an accurate representation of past or current Western Australian material, although they do include works by Western Australians. The majority of these collections are hardcopy, although the AMC is engaged in the ongoing digitisation of their collection.

It is difficult to offer a watertight definition for new music although the AMC suggests that it includes “notated composition, electroacoustic music, improvised music (including contemporary jazz), electronica, sound art, installation sound, and multimedia, web and film sound” (AMC, 2008). The genre is often experimental and improvised, without a score (Hope, Riddoch & James, 2009). It may be part of an installation, and is frequently encountered in combination with one or more alternative/additional artforms, such as dance or film. It can encompass site-specific works, soundscapes and music made from non-traditional instruments, such as teapots. Further, the ephemeral nature of new music means that some iconic performances and events will lack formal sound recordings but may nonetheless be evoked through the recollections of audience members and any memorabilia that they might have retained. The range and diversity of recordings, performances, artefacts and the many contexts of new music pose a significant challenge to the archive and the research team in terms of artefact capture and digitisation.

It is interesting to note that Australia has been leading the field in the examination of digital preservation issues since 1994 (Lee, Slattery, Lu, Tang & McCrarry, 2002). Several projects in Australia have aimed to preserve various digital materials, including the Preserving and Accessing Networked Documentary Resources of Australia (PANDORA) project at the National Library of Australia, which led Web archiving methodologies internationally (Lee et al., 2002). The primary objectives of PANDORA are to capture, archive, and provide long-term access to significant online publications, addressing both archiving and preservation processes.

Major international music digitisation projects such as Variations2 (Dunn, Byrd, Notess, Riley & Scherle, 2006) and European Music Navigator exclude Australian music almost completely, highlighting the need for Australia to create its own repositories and interfaces. Recent overseas projects using e-technologies to
support research outcomes include the Online Music Recognition and Searching project (OMRAS), which developed automated symbolic processing methods to aid music discovery and retrieval (Byrd & Crawford, 2002), and was used as a basis in the Australian Music Navigator: Research Infrastructure for Discovering, Accessing and Analysing Australia’s Musical Landscape project, despite its limited application to non-notated music. The Australian Music Navigator was an ARC Linkage Infrastructure, Equipment and Facilities project with the AMC as industry partner and was one of the means through which the dearth of archived WA new music became apparent.

The Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music (CHARM) at the University of London ran from 2004 to 2009 with the aim of promoting the musicological study of recordings, drawing on a wide range of approaches such as computational analysis and business history. The CHARM project was an example of a larger research enterprise concerned with analysis of recorded materials to glean generalisable information, in that case particularly to do with performance style and technique (Leech-Wilkinson, 2009). These globally innovative projects have provided a valuable background for negotiating emerging trends in digital archiving.

If new music is an important aspect of the creative and cultural life of Western Australia, the archive is a means of presenting it as if it were a coherent entity. Velody (1998) comments that “behind its apparently systematically organized array of objects, artefacts and data, lie a panoply of contingent and ad hoc machines for bringing the performance of the art museum into play” (p. 10). The construction of this resource is necessarily a dynamic and evolving project and one which requires the harnessing of the imagination and energy of musicians and their publics and audiences to realise its aims.

The Future of WANMA

The important task of discovering and confirming the nature, location, scope and accessibility of collections of Western Australian new music has been the primary activity of the WANMA project to date, a process which began over twenty years ago. More recent work has involved researching the most appropriate technologies, processes and techniques to deliver an online archive that is able to grow and develop over time, with the ability to house non-traditional forms of music and ephemera. The complex matter of copyright surrounding public accessibility and contributors’ rights in digital music archives (Besek, 2003) has always been an important part of the ongoing project at large, with the intention of realising a comprehensive, curated, living music archive of Western Australian music from 1970 to date that is accessible to an international audience. In addition to the collection of extant materials for the archive, the realisation of concerts and sound installations of works in and for the archive is an important component in the ongoing development of WANMA. This highlights the nature of both WANMA and Tura New Music as proactive supporters of Western Australian music in practice and legacy.

The upcoming phase of archive development is the finalisation of resource construction at SLWA, in close association with the project partners. Wide consultation on interface design will ensure an archive of maximum utility for the next stage of the project. WANMA in fact builds on the infrastructure acquired by SLWA for an oral history digitisation project funded by LotteryWest. As part of the LotteryWest project, SLWA purchased extensive hard drive arrays and systems, and established open source server systems that will be used as a starting point for WANMA, augmenting these with more hard-disc storage arrays. These arrays will host the content of the archive, which will be made available to the public through a website portal that is separate to the SLWA catalogue, whilst remaining accessible through the catalogue. The archive back end will be built with open source software that is currently being employed at the State Records office of Western Australia. This employs a web-based archival description tool known as ICA-Atom, together with a digital preservation system known as Archivematica. These systems can be customised to link with the larger SLWA catalogue.

The curators, alongside the ABC and National Library of Australia, will guide SLWA staff towards finding Western Australian new music resources beyond the three-year period of the grant. This will be done by
familiarising the staff with current WA new music practice, key performers, composers and industry representatives through the live concert performances as part of the project, but also materials currently in the archive, currently reflecting 25 years of WA music activity collected by Tura New Music. It is hoped that public imagination will be fired by the project as it becomes public, with the latter stages of the project incorporating the “crowdsourcing of information” (Delitt & Schindeler, 2012). Studies examining user involvement in particular items and metadata show that the problem is often not securing contributors, but rather controlling and managing their contributions (Riley & Shepherd, 2009). Institutions such as libraries and museums have long relied on volunteer contributions, the main differences for online contributors being that of scale, connectedness and ease of use (Oomen & Aroyo, 2011).

The major method for accessing volunteer participants is through the use of snowball referrals (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) using widening circles of influence for recruiting support. The centre of this influencer-circle is constructed from Tura New Music’s networks, and those of the libraries and co-industry partner, broadcaster ABC. These networks account for many hundreds of people with an established interest in the field. From this core, using industry partner contacts in terms of mailing lists and member profiles, key opinion leaders and motivators will be alerted to the existence of the archive and their help enlisted to recruit others. In addition to publicising the development of the archive through such networks, the project will garner publicity through print and broadcast media and recruit directly from the wider public. New recordings for the archive, already planned as part of the research, will provide a further opportunity to request audience members to take part. Once recruited, audiences will be guided by the site as to how to make their contributions – for example, through scanning a pamphlet that promoted a 1970s concert and uploading it to the archive. There will be access to additional support where required. This methodology builds upon the digitisation project previously completed with Tura New Music, which provided the proof of concept that underpins the original proposal for funding.

There is a fine balance to be struck between encouraging public participation and ownership of the project and ensuring the relevance and quality of materials deposited. While digital resources raise different storage challenges from those arising with traditional hard copy resources, it remains important that materials are flagged for relevance via such strategies as tagging. ‘Report abuse’ and ‘query relevance’ buttons will help ensure that the archive balances the needs of the user in the face of possibly indiscriminate contributions by participants. Ultimately, professional archivists will control WANMA’s content while aiming to encourage wide participation and take-up. With the SLWA taking responsibility for hosting WANMA and committing to its ongoing management and development, this three year investment in an ARC Linkage project will continue to provide research benefits long into the future without a reliance on recurrent funding.

The input of the staff at the National Library of Australia will ensure that future developments of WANMA are interoperable with the national information infrastructure. The NLA and the SLWA work in close consultation, and already form part of a wider national coordination through National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA). The NLA and SLWA will work together to establish the standards, protocols and methodologies for the project to ensure that WANMA is interoperable with international bibliographic and digitisation/digital archiving processes. The NLA is an integrator of new technologies and supports archives that link and chain together including through the application and use of technical tools. Its leadership and experience in managing and archiving digital objects as well as archiving websites, such as the aforementioned PANDORA, will provide an essential pool of advice to the project.

WANMA will add a sophisticated and multi-layered approach to bibliographic retrieval mechanisms for music, enhancing the value of current national infrastructures supporting music research and performance. The content in WANMA will not only be available to the public for the first time; much of it will also be heard for the first time and will permit users to engage more deeply with music online. The establishment of WANMA in a major state library will provide important ground-breaking research and development concerning intermedia digitisation, as well as increasing awareness of Western Australian musical cultural life.
World Leading?

Although WANMA is a new-archive-in-preparation, Australia – and particularly the NLA – can argue that it is a global leader in at least one aspect of digital archives: “the newspaper correction program” (Delitt & Schindeler, 2012). Since March 2007 the NLA (n.d.) has been running a project (the Australian Newspaper Digitisation Program) to digitise the nation’s historic print media resources as they come out of copyright, currently comprising those titles and issues printed between 1803 and the 1950s, starting with the first colonial newspaper. There is still some way to go before the work is finished. The project was made available for public access in July 2008, and newly digitised articles are released every day. Each original newspaper article is scanned using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software, which creates a digital document which is a ‘copy’ of the printed press item. Unfortunately, OCR software results can be unreliable, with plenty of instances of like-looking shapes being confused – for example, b being replaced by 6, S by 5.

The public pages offer instances of the issues arising from relying on OCR to construct a searchable database. For example, the OCR-generated text asserted:

> Both statements are incorrect. Dr Ullathorne expressly mentions that there were three priests here on his arrival in 1813 the Rev. J. V. Dowling, who had arrived in 1829, being the third, and he certainly does not assert, or lead any ordinarily careful reader to suppose, that disputes had arisen between Fathers M’Enroe and Therry. (Rhonda M., 2013)

The revised version is readily comprehensible and accurately searchable, but such labour-intensive activity would ordinarily be prohibitively expensive.

It is in this context that Delitt and Schindeler (2012) note that “the activity of volunteer text correctors has broken new ground for Australian services. Many thousands of people have corrected more than 50 million lines of text, with around 60,000 lines corrected every day”. This activity reflects an urge to “develop transparent, networked, multimedia, multi-repository resources” (Gilliland-Swetland, 2000, p. 1). The urge to contribute reflects a similar desire by musicians and their audiences to recognise personal activity in, and enthusiasm for, WA’s new music scene as meaningful and important. The existence of the archive demonstrates the importance of over 40 years of new music activity in Western Australia and provides a focus through which that importance can be made accessible and can be expanded. Further, the collection will ensure that the past is more available to the artists and audiences who will be constructing the future.

The digital newspapers project is not the only example in the NLA’s collections of the crowdsourcing of expertise. In the mid-2000s, the NLA harnessed the photo storage and sharing online image repository Flickr to expand and update the free-to-access PictureAustralia resource:

> Previously PictureAustralia gave users access to images only from collecting institutions such as libraries, galleries archives and museums. Flickr was used as an instrument to receive photographic submissions from the public. The PictureAustralia Flickr group (now feeding into Trove) has 2,836 public members and has accepted nearly 100,000 images of Australia and Australians. (Delitt & Schindeler, 2012)

The hope is that WANMA will similarly engage with members of Western Australia’s new music communities.
This may not be a realistic ambition. The newspaper correction project is a particularly absorbing one, with a range of statements made about why text correctors have become involved. One person, for example, notes:

Each contributor may have a different combination of motives, not a single one. … I had been encountering Trove occasionally for several years. I made a point of always editing any article that I used, but I kept coming across articles that I could not correct in full because there were lines missing, and only registered contributors can insert new lines. So I registered. (Catessa, 2011)

A different text corrector explains her engagement on the grounds that she is:

a hobbyist researcher with a huge interest in labour history, and this [Trove] gives me an outlet that far trumps any other alternative. I often focus on early 20th century labour politics, sometime segueing into interesting events that happened at the time, and sometimes into cultural aspects of the times (i.e. I find old women’s interest columns fascinating). I’d spend all day on here if I could, and I think I used to be about #7 in the text correctors’ list, but being in my twenties and having to work and study I just can’t keep up with the retirees! (Rebecca, 2012)

A friendly rivalry is encouraged within the community, as this latter comment indicates with its note about rankings being applied to text correctors in terms of their outputs. The community engagement was one of the possible benefits foreseen of the national digitisation program. Potential benefits include:

- Data quality is improved for all users;
- Keyword searching is improved for all users;
- The community becomes involved and engaged in enhancing and enriching the resource;
- Users become empowered;
- Innovative thinking is demonstrated;
- The method to improve data quality is cost effective;
- If successful the method could potentially be applied to other full text projects;
- Web 2.0 technologies could be utilised and the service would have a ‘cool factor’;
- The resource is more likely to meet user expectations if digital content is improved; and
- New virtual user communities and social networks would be built. (Holley, 2009)

Equivalent hopes are held for WANMA and its future development, with the creation of a community of archive contributors and users who, it is hoped, will find that WANMA is a space in which they can relive, retrieve and contribute to a record of key experiences around new music and its place in Western Australian artistic heritage. This would focus more on the inclusion, rather than correction, of materials, and could include the addition of photographs, posters, flyers, newspaper and magazine reviews, bootleg recordings and other ephemera relating to a performance of a particular work in the archive.

The SLWA has successfully implemented a pilot project of a similar nature with Storylines, a central access point for digitised heritage collections relating to Aboriginal history in Western Australia (SLWA, n.d.). The project uses the ‘Ara Iritija’ software, a purpose-built platform developed in South Australia for the project of the same name, which allows the tagging and linking of a variety of materials including video and audio, as well as public uploading.
Harnessing the Hive

The notion of “harnessing the hive” in digital domains first arose in terms of open source software development (Streeter, 2003) but became more prominent as a key component of Web 2.0 activities, where many collaborators work together to achieve a project that an individual or a small group could not hope to realise alone. Wikis and blogs are both instances of such Web 2.0 technologies (Bruns, 2008), with Wikipedia an early example of the transformative power of collaborative activity (Green, 2010). The NLA newspaper digitisation program is another.

This metaphor of the hive builds upon previous metaphors of coordinated online activity, “the cathedral” and “the bazaar” (Raymond, 2000). The dichotomy of the cathedral/bazaar contrasts the coordinated, directed activity of workers who know their place and do not venture too far from the constraints of their role (as in a large commercial software company, for example), with the vibrancy and enterprise evident in a dynamic, competitive, yet collaborative marketplace.

Voluntary cultures that work this way are not actually uncommon … [for example] science fiction fandom, which unlike hackerdom has long explicitly recognized ‘egoboo’ (ego-boosting, or the enhancement of one’s reputation among other fans) as the basic drive behind volunteer activity. (Raymond, 2000)

There are good ways and not so good ways of encouraging people to work together online. Esther Dyson, in a foreword to an early article on “Harnessing the hive” (Herz, 2002), notes that a (commercial) organisation that hopes to engage others in its projects needs to:

- foster the community: Give it a place to congregate and collaborate. And it needs to build macros that make it easy to add functionality. An optimist would point to Web services … and indeed they provide some of the technical platform that will make it easy for third parties to add modules. But developers should think a little about creating an appropriate cultural platform, too. How can you encourage users to feel a sense of creative (not just financial) ownership? (Dyson in Herz, 2002, p. 2)

This vision clarifies the dynamic in which it is communities that give rise to some archives which constitute “a crucial site for national memory … [acting] as the sanctum, the place in which the sacred texts and objects were stored that were used to generate collective identity and social solidarity” (Featherstone, 2006, p. 592). The creation of WANMA marks the birth of a living archive, fostering performance, recording, and leading-edge academic research. A unified, accessible home for Western Australian new music has begun, complemented by a wide variety of resources for those interested in new music, whether as performers, researchers, students or lay persons. The aim of the archive has always been to provide musicologists, performers and the broader industry with access to works previously unavailable, thus actively encouraging research and development in new music curation and creation. As a critical resource for researchers of Australia’s cultural history, and a tool to enhance the development of cultural industries, the archive promotes access to and fosters awareness of, Western Australian new music activity.

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References


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Celebrating the National Disability Insurance Scheme?
Insights from News Media and Disability Advocates

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Abstract
The legislative framework to establish the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) was passed by the Australian Parliament in March 2013. The NDIS is expected to become fully operational in 2018-19 and to provide care and support to 410,000 people with a significant and permanent disability. This paper draws upon news media reports and commentary from disability advocates to highlight some salient themes and areas of tension in public discussion of the NDIS during 2012. It discusses the 2011 Productivity Commission report, which provided the most recent impetus for the scheme. The report was welcomed by the federal government and the opposition, both of whom have framed the NDIS as an achievement to make Australians proud. However, conflict between the federal and state governments with regard to funding the scheme became a focus of news media coverage as political leaders accused each other of putting politics before disabled people. This conflict was criticised by disability advocates who argued it amounted to treating disabled people as a political football. The NDIS has been widely welcomed and celebrated as a major social policy reform with the potential to improve the lives of many disabled Australians. However, this paper also identifies contested aspects of the NDIS that have received less attention, including the model of disability underpinning it and its market-based ideology. The social model of disability and previous work on disability policy in Australia and elsewhere provides the context in which these issues are discussed.

Keywords: NDIS; disability; news media; disability policy; advocacy

Introduction and Background
The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) legislation was passed by the Australian Parliament in March, 2013. The NDIS is expected to become fully operational in 2018-19 and to provide care and support to 410,000 people with a “permanent and significant” disability (National Disability Insurance Agency, 2013). Trials of the scheme commenced in selected sites around the country in July 2013. This paper draws upon news media reports and commentary from disability advocates to identify key themes and areas of tension that have emerged in public discussion of the NDIS primarily during 2012 when it received considerable media attention. In addition to what has been prominent in news media coverage, I also consider aspects of the NDIS that have received less attention. The paper discusses the NDIS and media reporting of it with reference to the social model of disability and disability policy in Australia.

The disabilities movement in Australia, as elsewhere, formed around the social model of disability (Newell, 1999; see also Oliver, 1986, 1990), which provides an influential counter to the individual deficit view of disability. The social model makes an important distinction between impairment and disability where the latter refers to the obstacles that social structures and systems create for people who have impairments. It represents, according to Jolly (2003), “an active resistance to one of the powerful political projects of the modern era: the disablement of individuals with accredited impairments or illness, and their
objectification as subjects of government and social welfare” (p. 515). In Australia, Goggin and Newell (2005) make a similar point:

In order to reform the care system, we need to move beyond disability as the failure of medicine, the site of care, and the defect located within a deviant body or mind. This requires a fundamental recasting of how disability is constructed in health and welfare. (p. 52)

News media play an important role in framing disability issues for the public as well as providing a valuable insight into the problematic and taken-for-granted assumptions about disability that operate within society. Disability activists and scholars have long considered media representations of disabled people as both a source of disability and of attitudes that condone or legitimise the treatment of people with disabilities as ‘deficient’ or objects of pity (Goggin & Newell, 2003; see also Beckett, 2006; Ross, 2001). As Ellis (2009) argues, “The media has an integral role in both reflecting and reinforcing social disablement and imagining people with a disability as a vulnerable group” (p. 25). As well as reinforcing disabling attitudes, portrayals of people with a disability can also be catalysts for social change (see Nelson, 2000). But this is contingent upon policymakers and other social actors promoting models of disability that are not centred on individual deficit and medicalised understandings, making it important to consider how a range of sources conceive disability issues.

The idea of an NDIS was first considered during the Whitlam era in the 1970s but buried as a result of the political upheaval at the time (Soldatic & Pini, 2012). It was given renewed impetus during the term of the first Rudd Labor government, whose 2007 election platform included the development of a National Disability Strategy (2010-2020), and when it re-emerged as an idea in the ‘2020 Big Ideas Summit’ held in 2008. The National Disability Strategy reflects a commitment from all levels of government to a national approach to improving the lives of disabled people, their families and carers and to leading a community-wide shift in attitudes. The strategy draws on the 2009 Shut Out report by the National People with Disabilities and Carer Council, which suggested new funding mechanisms and service delivery models and is credited with building momentum within the disability community towards reforming the Australian disability landscape (Soldatic & Pini, 2012). The next major step was in November 2009 when Prime Minister Rudd announced a Productivity Commission inquiry into what was then referred to as a National Disability Long-Term Care and Support Scheme, with particular attention to a social insurance model. The inquiry began in April 2010 and released its final report in July 2011.

The Productivity Commission on the NDIS

The Productivity Commission’s over 1,000-page Disability Care and Support report said:

The current disability support system is underfunded, unfair, fragmented, and inefficient, and gives people with a disability little choice and no certainty of access to appropriate supports. The stresses on the system are growing, with rising costs for all governments. (Productivity Commission, 2011, p. 2)

The report provided details about the design and implementation of the NDIS and recommended that it be overseen by a single agency, the National Disability Insurance Agency. It said the care needs of some 410,000 Australians with “significant disabilities would be covered under the NDIS and that the benefits of the scheme would significantly outweigh the costs” (p. 2). Increased funding, choice and certainty were identified as key features of the scheme:

People would have much more choice in the proposed NDIS. Their support packages would be tailored to their individual needs. People could choose their own provider(s), ask an intermediary to assemble the best package on their behalf, cash out their funding allocation and direct the funding to areas of need (with appropriate probity controls and support), or choose a combination of these options. (Productivity Commission, 2011, p. 3)
This kind of language is characteristic of individualised funding and direct payments policies in other countries, with personalisation and individualised funding presented as predominant means of empowerment, inclusion and participation for people with a disability. The report identified as the preferred option that the scheme be entirely funded by the Australian government and for it to be rolled out in a few regions from mid-2014. It said the NDIS would aim to “ensure quality assurance and diffusion of best practice among providers” (p. 3). It also suggested an expansive, and perhaps more ambitious, role for the NDIS, including better linking the community and people with disabilities by using not-for-profit organisations and helping to break down stereotypes. However, detail is lacking about how the NDIS will achieve this and questions have been raised about its ability to do so (see Fawcett & Plath, 2012).

The much-anticipated Productivity Commission report placed the NDIS on the media agenda and in the public domain as both sides of politics sought to demonstrate their support for it. Certain aspects of the report were widely reproduced in media reporting and politicians’ comments about the NDIS, particularly its description of the current system, the number of people the NDIS is expected to cover and the cost-benefit rationale for it, including that it could encourage employment of people with a disability. The news value and framing power of the report was achieved by highlighting the current dire situation of people with a disability and selling the economic benefits of the NDIS and the idea that it will provide a safety net for all Australians because disability can happen to anyone at any time.

The NDIS appears to represent a major achievement and a step towards improving Australia’s poor record in its treatment of the reportedly 20% of its citizens with a disability, many of whom struggle to access the services and social supports they need in order, in some cases, to realise their basic human rights. Among the benefits attributed to the NDIS are that it will provide dignity to those with a disability currently unable to get the care and support they need, a sense of relief for ageing carers who worry about what will happen to their loved one when they are gone, opportunity for people with a disability, their carers and families to participate in the workforce, and a safety net (i.e. insurance) for all Australians that they will be looked after should they acquire a disability. Politicians, advocates and journalists have variously invoked these in their responses to the NDIS. In what follows I highlight some salient themes and areas of tension in mediated public discussion of the NDIS.

**Political Ownership: Bipartisanship and Federal-State Conflict**

The Productivity Commission’s report was welcomed by the federal government and the opposition, both of whom sought to frame the NDIS as an achievement that will make Australians proud. Both sides of politics emphasised that they were up to the NDIS “challenge”. In a front-page story in *The Australian*, headlined ‘Disability Plan to be Fast-Tracked – Budget Cuts to Bankroll Scheme’, the Treasurer Wayne Swan said:

>A society that cares for people with disabilities, that engages their humanity and encourages their participation – this is a society that can rightly claim to be among the most successful in the world. Of course, the NDIS will be expensive and difficult, it will take time, but I believe we’re up to the challenge. (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 1)

In ‘Abbott Pledges Support for NDIS – Coalition Seeks to Share Credit on Disability Insurance’, the opposition leader used similar rhetoric in expressing his support for the NDIS, framing it as a matter of national pride:

>I think we are up to the challenge of beginning and sustaining a reform that represents our country at its best and that might enable more Australians to feel proud of their parliament. (Franklin, 2012, p. 2)
Media reports show the Gillard government framing the NDIS as the latest in a long line of social reforms initiated by Labor governments, while the opposition linked the success of the NDIS to the government achieving a surplus, using it to emphasise its economic responsibility and credentials compared with the government. These were predictable moves in the context of bipartisanship on the NDIS and a looming federal election. However, they also signal the tendency for media reports about the NDIS to focus on the actions of politicians and political motives in a way that positioned disabled people as the (grateful) objects or recipients of politicians’ goodwill and agendas. This was particularly evident in news media reporting of political conflict about funding for the NDIS, which was a key focus during 2012. It emerged most clearly in conflict between the state conservative governments and the federal Labor government, who accused each other of putting politics before ‘the disabled’. The states’ concern was that the Gillard government was making grand promises without providing them with the details necessary to make an informed decision about the NDIS, particularly with respect to funding arrangements. For example, in early April a front-page story in The Australian headlined ‘Fast-Track Disability Plan a “Cruel Hoax”’ reported in the lead that:

Julia Gillard and Wayne Swan have been accused by the Victorian government of perpetrating a ‘cruel hoax’ on disabled Australians by talking up a national disability insurance scheme before any funding deal has been put to the states. (Salusinszky & Ferguson, 2012, p. 1)

The states argued the Gillard government was creating expectations that it is unlikely to have the capacity to deliver as well as not wanting to share credit for the scheme. A spokesman for the Victorian government was reported as saying, “the federal government’s promise of an NDIS risks amounting to nothing more than a cruel hoax on some of our neediest and most deserving citizens” (p. 1). In another story in May headlined ‘States Fret Over Their Ability to Fund National Disability Scheme’ the lead emphasised the political conflict:

State treasurers have accused the Gillard government of raising ‘false hopes’ with its National Disability Insurance Scheme, saying they may have trouble funding it. (Wilson, 2012, p. 6)

The main source was the NSW Treasurer who was quoted as saying he “can’t think of a lower act in politics when you think of the sector” (Wilson, 2012, p. 6). Shadow Treasurer Joe Hockey repeated the “cruel hoax” accusation in a National Press Club address in May and also criticised the Gillard government for failing to properly engage with the states (Ireland, 2012). In July ‘Macklin on Notice on NDIS’ reported that NSW ministers planned to “ambush” Community Services Minister Jenny Macklin to demand direct negotiations on the NDIS rather than a planned teleconference. Macklin described her disappointment that NSW ministers “would rather focus their time and energy on political stunts than delivering for people with disability” (Salusinszky, 2012, p. 6).

Later in July reports focused on the Gillard government’s rejection of a proposal from Liberal premiers for an increase in income tax to fund the NDIS. In its front-page story headlined ‘Gillard Rejected States’ NDIS Offer’ The Australian attributed the government’s rejection to fears that the opposition would seize on it as a “great big new tax” (Van Onselen & Franklin, 2012, pp. 1, 6). It also emphasised the Gillard government’s departure from the recommendation of the Productivity Commission report that the NDIS be fully funded by the federal government. In its story headlined ‘Labor Rules Out Tax Increase to Fund Disability Reform’ the Sydney Morning Herald emphasised that the opposition leader also did not support the Liberal premiers’ proposal to “resolve the stand-off over funding” (Wright, 2012). It made no mention of the “great big new tax” claim. Unlike The Australian’s story it also gave considerable space to Prime Minister Gillard’s and Jenny Macklin’s criticisms of conservative state leaders for failing to commit funding to enable the NDIS trials to commence in their states. It quoted Julia Gillard: “All we are asking is for them to live up to the expectations they have raised in their own communities [about the NDIS]”. Both stories quoted Tony Abbott: “The last thing that we would want to do would be to give people with a
disability and their families false hope that there will be an NDIS by allowing it to become bogged down in political posturing” (Van Onselen & Franklin, 2012, p. 1; Wright, 2012).

Stories such as these are revealing in as much as politicians on both sides all claimed to support the scheme, yet their disagreement about how it should be funded can be seen to have overshadowed discussion of the NDIS policy itself. Talk of disabled people and the disability sector as recipients of “cruel hoaxes” and “false hopes” tended to play upon and reinforce an image of disabled people as vulnerable and needy bystanders to the debate. This appeared to be how some commentators interpreted the political bickering.

Talking Back to Political Bickering

In addition to being a focal point for news reports, political bickering and point-scoring over the NDIS was criticised by some feature writers and columnists, in letters to the editor and online comments, and by disability advocates who emphasised the frustrations of disabled people, their families and the wider community. The following headlines give a sense of the tone of such mainstream media items: ‘Disability Scheme is Great, In Theory’ (Van Onselen, 2012); ‘Idea of a Fair Go Lost at the Altar of Politics’ (Clark, 2012); ‘The Politics of Procrastination Steals Time and Hope’ (Murphy, 2012); ‘Politicicking on Disabilities Shames Premiers’ (Editorial, 2012); ‘Disability Scheming Trips Up Premiers Who Should Know Better’ (Grattan, 2012). These columns reveal a desire, also evident among disability advocates, for discussion about what the NDIS will actually deliver in practice above and beyond the political rhetoric and point scoring.

Stella Young, editor of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Ramp Up website, which is dedicated to discussion and debate about disability, has sought to bring a rights perspective to the issue. In one contribution headlined ‘NDIS is Important, Let’s Take the Time to Get It Right’, she discussed with pride the rallies around the country that saw people with a disability and their families showing their support for the NDIS and for, as she put it, “better lives” (Young, 2012a). She emphasised that the NDIS is or should be about changing the way people with disability are treated in Australia. The following comment suggests her resistance to a managerialist discourse and I note her reference to “kind of choice”, a theme that is picked up later in the paper:

> We need a National Disability Insurance Agency that responds to, rather than regulates, the needs of people with disability and our families. We need to make sure that we are at the heart of this system, and no longer at the mercy of service providers. We need the kind of choice and control over our own lives that we don’t have now. We need to make sure that this system we’re fighting for isn’t just another bandaid. (Young, 2012a)

This article generated 73 responses with some praising the federal government and others more cautious and concerned about its ability to get the NDIS right. Picking up on the concern Young raised about the need for people with a disability to be at the centre of the NDIS, one contributor alluded to the disability rights movement’s slogan ‘Nothing About Us Without Us’:

> My main concern all along reading the media releases from the pollies and keeping abreast of the activities via everyaustralianscounts is the creepy feeling that despite the positives of the Productivity Commission report that [the] issue is slowly being hijacked by the kind of people who think they know what’s good for us. (choirboy)

The ‘Every Australian Counts’ referred to in this comment is the campaign launched in January 2011 by the National Disability and Carer Alliance. During 2012 it initiated NDIS rallies around the country and used online and social media to promote the NDIS and the circumstances of Australians with a disability and their families. This includes providing on its website short video clips showing people’s stories and
enabling people to share their own experiences. At the time of writing, the campaign’s website showed that almost 157,000 people had indicated their support for the NDIS (Every Australian Counts, 2012).

In another contribution to The Drum Young (2012b) said it is disappointing that the premiers are using people with a disability as a “political football”. She took issue with the focus on funding at the expense of what this actually means for people with a disability and their families who do not necessarily think about the cost in monetary terms. Included among the 152 responses to this article were comments that touched on the way politicians are happy to be disability friendly when it suits them: “I suppose that when a disabled athlete wins a medal the hypocritical bastards [Liberal premiers] will be the first to line up for a photo shoot” (Malcolm). This gives some indication of the passions inspired by the action/inaction of politicians in relation to the NDIS.

On Language and Tactics

The use of language has been another area of concern and some debate about the NDIS. For example, John Walsh who served as the associate commissioner of the Productivity Commission inquiry identified problematic aspects of the NDIS legislation, including the passive language it uses to refer to people with a disability (Radio National, 2012a). He said people with disabilities continue to be the recipient rather than the leader, things are done to and required of the person, and they are involved in rather than controlling. Into 2013 the new name given to the NDIS was also a source of debate as doubts were raised about whether the views of people with a disability were taken into account. In one contribution to The Drum, headlined ‘DisabilityCare: A Bad Name But a Good Direction’, Stella Young (2013) quoted Minister Jenny Macklin as saying, “The name has been chosen based on consultations with people with disability, their families and carers, peak organisations and the general public”. But Young quoted the head of the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, Lesley Hall, who said: “Using the word ‘care’ perpetuates the myth that people with disability are passive and in need of help. It is support people want – not charity, not welfare”. Young said she was unable to find an individual or organisation who was consulted who liked the name. She also said the disability sector is no stranger to terrible names, referring to the DisabiliTEA events that have been part of the Every Australian Counts campaign and criticised by some activists, including Young, as being patronising and condescending (Larsen, 2012; Miletic, 2012). Of this, Young (2013) said:

It’s all terribly cute while doing approximately nothing to address the paternalistic attitudes we fight so hard against.

We’ve tolerated this condescending language in the disability sector for too long now, so perhaps we’re all partly to blame for DisabilityCare. We haven’t been talking about rights enough.

What is interesting about the differences of opinion about the DisabiliTEA events is that they point to tensions within the Australian disability and carer community about the most desirable means of achieving better lives for disabled people and harnessing public support to that end. On the DisabilityCare name, as identified in some responses to Young’s article, there are those who see it as simply a word and care little for what it is called so long as the NDIS is implemented effectively. The name may have been adopted for its sound bite quality or to align the NDIS with Medicare. However, the fact that key disability organisations objected to the use of the word “care” raises questions about who was actually consulted about the name. Further, the President of People with Disability Australia was critical of the government for closing the ‘Your Say’ thread on the NDIS website, which included many criticisms of ‘DisabilityCare’ (Palenzuela, 2013). While the coalition reverted to the NDIS name when it came to government in 2013, the naming issue is perhaps emblematic of wider concerns about whether people with disabilities have been placed at the centre of thinking about the NDIS and whether there has been enough discussion of redesigning the system in such a way as to ensure greater control for disabled people (Leipoldt, 2009; see also Soltatic & Pini, 2012).
Concerns about the NDIS

Writing online in 2010 prior to the release of the Productivity Commission’s report, Erik Leipoldt and ‘Towards Good Lives’, an independent network of people concerned about the NDIS process, raised concerns about the inquiry’s terms of reference and called for amendments. Leipoldt (2010), a disability advocate and academic, criticised the inquiry for not adhering to a social model of disability and instead being couched in a medical/economic model. In ‘Framing Disability Through the National Disability Insurance Scheme’ on the Ramp Up website Leipoldt (2011) argued:

A disability movement that backs this market-based NDIS initiative is confusing our need for more individual choice, and independence, where admittedly we come from a very low base, with that of the self-interested kind of consumer choice and competition that is the market.

Like Stella Young’s earlier article there is a cautionary tone about the kind of choice the scheme will facilitate. Leipoldt’s article was met with support from ‘Vern’ who argued that politicians lack both the knowledge and the will to challenge “the NDIS marketing push”, fearing that if they scrutinise it they will be accused of “lacking in compassion”. But such views were not shared by others who interpreted Leipoldt’s article as resting on unnecessary binaries and “abstract” concerns. For example, Sue O’Reilly suggested there are many flaws in Leipoldt’s argument and implied that his views are detached from the real world of people with a disability who do not have “heads full of academic theory and post-modernist waffle”. She argued:

… [Leipoldt] wilfully seeks to confuse the need to change and improve social attitudes and values (which is of course essential), with the pressing need that also exists to totally overhaul this country’s currently shambolic, wasteful and cruelly rationed disability ‘care and support’ system. Why is this an either/or, as Erik keeps insisting? Can’t we pursue both totally worthy goals simultaneously?

Elsewhere, in response to an article about the NDIS in The Monthly, Leipoldt emphasised “fundamental contradictions between the disabling market-based ideology that drives this NDIS proposal and the needs for people’s genuine social inclusion” (see Manne, 2011). He suggests there is no evidence that service provider competition for the disability dollar will drive a better system.

The Productivity Commission’s report and advocates for the NDIS emphasise that choice and control will be shifted to the individual disabled person to decide on the services that best suit their needs, rather than them being beholden to the often inadequate services on offer. But a counter-frame was provided by Doron Samuell (2012) in a feature in The Australian headlined ‘Disability Scheme Must Avoid Mistakes of Medicare’:

The scheme’s detractors have been preoccupied with what it will cost. The question of funding is important, but such a narrow debate risks obscuring a more important issue: whether the NDIS will improve services for people with disabilities and what it will mean for the disability service sector. (p. 12)

An indication of the consensus opinion built up around the NDIS, he broached the possibility of his commentary being (mis)construed as undermining “the legitimate need for increased funding, or the frustrations with the existing disability support system” (p. 12). But he questioned whether the NDIS will solve these problems or add to them and what the changes will mean for the quality of services, given that the model is assumed to work on the idea that the exercise of consumer choice will ensure that good providers are rewarded, thereby driving up the standard of services. He suggested the proposed scheme would actually disadvantage community-based service providers as large-scale commercial enterprises squeeze them out of the market. Samuell made the same points in an interview on Radio National (2012b), in which the host introduced him as adopting a “controversial position” in suggesting that the free market model encouraging individual choice and control is not necessarily to the benefit of people with a
disability. He suggested the scheme constitutes a shift away from paternalism to what is actually an illusion of choice. He said the Productivity Commission has no data on which to base its confidence and assertions that a market-based model works. Such critical views were for the most part absent from news media reporting during 2012.

Discussion

The NDIS is underpinned by a ‘personalisation’ narrative that some suggest may be an impediment to recognition of the disabling social barriers that affect all disabled people and could have the effect of obscuring alternative policy agendas (Dodd, 2013). Dodd writes that it can “prevent the imagining of any collective vision beyond the good of increased individual autonomy and choice” (p. 265). It is difficult to dispute the importance of choice and control, which are emphasised in the Productivity Commission’s report, particularly when they are presented as the keys to improving what has been described as the ‘lottery’ of care that characterises the existing disability services system. This might explain why there has been limited scrutiny of the NDIS in these terms and when such contributions have emerged they have been treated as outlier views. However, as such views highlight, choice, control and personalisation are not above scrutiny as means by which to overcome the kinds of attitudes and assumptions about disability that may limit the choices available to disabled people and inhibit social inclusion. Indeed, the celebratory tone surrounding the NDIS has in some respects overshadowed concerns about it as well as views suggesting that the human rights and social inclusion agenda of the disability movement has been absorbed within a neoliberal economic discourse in order to sell the NDIS.

In his critical report Designing NDIS: An International Perspective on Individual Funding Systems, Duffy (2013) identifies several flaws with the NDIS, including that it creates another level of centralised bureaucracy for disabled people to deal with. Duffy, who has over 20 years’ experience with trying to design individualised funding systems in the United Kingdom, argues “The current design is in conflict with human rights and lacks any basic trust in the competency of Australians with disability to make their own decisions” (p. 10). According to Duffy, the plan that disabled people will be asked to complete in conjunction with a facilitator in order to be able to receive funding under the scheme “imposes upon the person a set of restrictions and invasions of privacy” that are inconsistent with the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights (p. 18). He also says there is a risk that the NDIS will lead to indirect forms of rationing by not being clear about entitlements. Others too note that, within the NDIS, power to define one’s needs and levels of support required to meet them resides with professionals using standardised tools (Fawcett & Plath, 2012). These authors also suggest the NDIS has the potential to further alienate marginalised groups who experience structural disadvantages that limit their capacity to deal with individual budgets (see also Glendinning, 2008 on problems with the individual budgets system in the UK). Fawcett and Plath argue that the NDIS is grounded in an individualised view of disability where consumer purchasing power and choice are presented as means to empowerment. This brings with it the risk that the market will not deliver the required services.

During the Howard Government years (1996-2007) social movements struggled to develop repertoires of contention to engage the public and attract media attention, which led some to incorporate neoliberal ideology and neoconservative discourse as a way of furthering their cause in an otherwise hostile political climate (Maddison & Martin, 2010; see also Lantz & Marston, 2012). Soldatic and Chapman (2010) have described the increasing marginalisation of the disabilities movement within the political opportunity structure and the growing stigmatisation of the disabled identity under the Howard government. They also argue, “Formally recognized disability advocacy groups’ agency to resist and stand outside the bureaucratic structures had been largely overtaken by the necessity to move to the ‘inside’, even with the possible risk of complicity” (p. 148; see also Galvin, 2004). Soldatic and Pini (2009) suggest the way in which people with a disability were emotionally positioned within welfare-to-work debates created consent for the Howard government’s agenda, rendering critical debate largely absent from the public arena. This highlights the need for caution with respect to policies that appear to be implemented and
celebrated with little critical debate. For example, we might consider whether politicians as well as disability and carer groups have been constrained in their ability to criticise or raise doubts about the NDIS because doing so would be politically detrimental.

Disability advocates have been calling for policy reform and better services and models of support for decades and governments have commissioned numerous reports, yet the Productivity Commission’s recommendation of the NDIS has been particularly powerful in attracting the attention of politicians, the media and, in turn, the wider community. In a climate of bipartisan political support as well as apparently widespread support within the disability and carer community for the NDIS and seemingly unanimous agreement about the urgent need for reform, those who have raised doubts or concerns have, on occasion, been accused of being uncaring, abstract or disrespectful. The Every Australian Counts campaign promoting the NDIS has been highly organised and active, whereas one has had to look much harder for substantive criticism and discussion of certain aspects of it, such as the model of disability underpinning it and its market-based ideology. In some ways, the celebration of the NDIS for what it is hoped and expected to achieve has constrained critical discussion of it.

During 2012 the news media played an important role in monitoring and reporting political responses to the NDIS, as well as the hopes and frustrations of people within the disability and carer communities. The 2012 Federal Budget and the looming 2013 election shaped the way journalists interpreted and reported the NDIS and political responses to it. In this context, it was perhaps not surprising to see politics and perceived political agendas at the forefront of news reporting and nor was it necessarily a negative feature in as much as it at least kept the NDIS on the public agenda. It may be that the news media’s focus on political bickering helped to both generate and solidify public support for the NDIS against politicians being guided by short-term political interests and opportunism. The outrage directed at politicians might be seen as being consistent with a social model understanding of disability; evidence that people recognise that political game-playing may itself amount to a further form of disabling social attitudes. However, in accusing each other of playing politics, politicians’ references to cruel hoaxes and false hopes being inflicted on disabled people tended also to position them as vulnerable and passive objects or bystanders to the debate.

The visibility of disability issues in Australia has undoubtedly been enhanced by the prolonged attention to the NDIS, as well as the hopes and frustrations of people within the disability and carer communities. The 2012 Federal Budget and the looming 2013 election shaped the way journalists interpreted and reported the NDIS and political responses to it. In this context, it was perhaps not surprising to see politics and perceived political agendas at the forefront of news reporting and nor was it necessarily a negative feature in as much as it at least kept the NDIS on the public agenda. It may be that the news media’s focus on political bickering helped to both generate and solidify public support for the NDIS against politicians being guided by short-term political interests and opportunism. The outrage directed at politicians might be seen as being consistent with a social model understanding of disability; evidence that people recognise that political game-playing may itself amount to a further form of disablement. However, in accusing each other of playing politics, politicians’ references to cruel hoaxes and false hopes being inflicted on disabled people tended also to position them as vulnerable and passive objects or bystanders to the debate.

Certainly, discussion about the NDIS is ongoing as the trials are taking place. News media clearly have an important role to play in monitoring the successes, failures, impacts and inequities that appear. It will be interesting to see how media deal with the different experiences that emerge, especially around questions of eligibility and entitlements (i.e. determinations about what constitutes ‘reasonable and necessary supports’ to be funded under the scheme). Will they be presented as isolated cases affecting individuals in specific circumstances and with particular needs or will they be connected to pitfalls in the NDIS design or model itself? Further research could also look more closely at the role of the Every Australian Counts campaign in generating ongoing public support for the NDIS as well as the role of websites such as Ramp Up in monitoring the NDIS and using it as a platform to discuss wider disability issues. It would also be interesting to investigate views about the NDIS among the broader public to see what messages they have taken up and how these have influenced their attitudes about disability. While this paper has not attempted to do so, the concept of ‘mediatisation’ has been used to elaborate the relationships between news media
and policymaking processes (see Hjarvard, 2013; Lingard & Rawolle, 2004; McCallum, 2013) and this could provide a useful lens through which to conduct further research into the mediation of disability policy.

Conclusion

This paper has explored just some of the many dimensions of public discussion about the NDIS as it unfolded during 2012. It highlighted the influential role of the Productivity Commission’s report in providing the terms in which the NDIS has been discussed, the apparent news value of conflict between the federal and state governments over funding, and some of the critical issues identified by disability advocates and other commentators. While not dealing directly with how people with a disability have been portrayed, the paper offered some suggestions about their positioning in the context of news stories dealing with the politics of the NDIS. The political conflict over funding tended to position disabled people as passive recipients of the political whims of politicians. On the positive side, the NDIS has generated stories about the lived experiences of disabled people and created the opportunity for people to challenge the view of them as primarily recipients of care and objects of bureaucratic programs. While the NDIS is certainly a major reform for people with a disability, there is a risk that the amount of attention given to it and the expectations about what it can achieve has diverted attention from issues of substance pertaining to the reform as well as other issues of importance to people with a disability. There is more to be done in terms of community attitudes towards disability and creating a society in which rights for disabled people are fully realised, and it will be interesting to see if and how the NDIS is able to advance such goals.

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About the Author

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Do External Stakeholder Pressures Influence Customer Service and Complaints Handling Practices in the Australian Internet Service Provider Industry?

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Abstract
Poor customer service (CS) and complaints handling (CH) performance of the Australian Internet Service Provider (ISP) industry has been the subject of intense scrutiny over the past few years. Internet industry stakeholders such as the ombudsman, consumer association, regulator and government authorities have considered tighter regulation as a response to address the industry’s poor CS track record. This paper explores the role of external stakeholder pressures on the very large ISP (vlISP) industry that resulted in significant revisions to the CS/CH sections of Telecommunication Consumer Protection (TCP) Code. Qualitative research using eleven in-depth interviews with senior vlISP industry executives was conducted. Data analysis found that three key pressures (regulatory, customer, competition) influenced the revisions to the TCP code. Very few studies in the Australian context examine personal viewpoints of vlISP industry stakeholders to understand how and why vlISPs respond to such pressures. This is the first study that examines such viewpoints using an institutional theory lens. The study findings are: encourage vlISPs to collaborate with relevant stakeholders to manage expectations regarding CS/CH performance; provide valuable information for regulatory agencies, the consumer association and the complaints authority to develop an understanding of what pressures drive the changes required to enhance service improvements in areas where vlISPs under-perform; and assist external stakeholders to understand the types of pressures to which vlISP managers respond. The study findings will inform future quantitative studies to examine the influence of such pressures on the actual CS/CH performance of vlISPs.

Keywords: customer service; regulatory pressures; TCP code; internet industry; external pressures

Introduction
The past decade has seen a renewed importance in Customer Service (CS) and Complaints Handling (CH) performance of Australian Internet Service Providers (ISPs). Rapid increase in growth of services and complexity of products has made it increasingly difficult for ISPs to deliver consistent CS performance (Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), 2012). In this paper, CS refers to “provision of service to customers before, during and after a purchase” (ACCAN, 2012). CH refers to “an expression of dissatisfaction related to an organization’s products, services or the complaints handling process itself” (Australian Communications & Media Authority (ACMA), 2012). There is a growing body of literature highlighting poor CS/CH performance of Australian very large ISPs (vlISPs) over the period 2008-2011 (Havyatt, 2010; Wood, 2010; Gerrand, 2011; ACMA, 2012; ACCAN, 2012; Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO), 2012). vlISPs typically have more than 100,000 subscribers (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2012). An authoritative source of information on CS/CH performance of vlISPs can be found in the TIO annual complaint reports (complaints recorded between 1 July of the corresponding year to 30 June the following year). An analysis of the complaints data over the period 2006/2007 to 2010/2011 showed a steady increase in CS/CH complaints (consideration was given to the proportion of complaints against the number of subscribers). These TIO reports also contained a number of indications that the industry was falling seriously short in its CS/CH
obligations to its customers, resulting in customer dissatisfaction and frustration. This triggered regulator, ombudsman, consumer association campaigns and inquiry into the CS/CH practices of the industry (ACMA, 2011; TIO, 2012). Further, poor CS/CH performance has several socio-economic implications for consumer protection, customer exodus, industry reputation and business survival. This has serious effects for the whole nation, particularly when the internet is fast becoming an important communication medium for both individuals and businesses. This study focused on the top four vILSPs in Australia. Justification for this focus is provided in Table 1.

**Service Quality in Internet Industry Context**

Service quality in the internet industry refers to “the manner in which services are delivered to customers” (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988, p.12). In Australia, the customer perception of service quality is influenced by both technical factors (What is delivered?) within a vILSP network such as speed, availability, and reliability of a network, and functional factors (How it is delivered?) outside an ISP network such as CS, CH, contracts, billing, and responsiveness (Havyatt 2010b; ACMA, 2012; ACCAN, 2012; TIO, 2012). When a vILSP fails to provide good services to customers, a complaint about a problem soon turns out to become a complaint about a company. Poor CH performance can damage the reputation of the company and lead to business losses. In the lifetime of a customer belonging to a vILSP, the service is not permanently tied to technical or functional service. Instead, both services are demanded by customers based on the circumstances that surround their service needs. Improved CS/CH performance is crucial for providers to attract new customers and retain their existing customers in a competitive market place. Additionally, CS is expected to play a key role for future internet services such as the National Broadband Network (NBN), where absence of monopoly over network necessitates vILSPs to compete on service quality differentiation as opposed to infrastructure differentiation (ACMA, 2012). Some key questions to consider are: How are the CS/CH practices developed in the internet industry? Who are the key stakeholders?

In the current co-regulatory regime, section 112 and 113 of the Telecommunications Act 1997 (Cth) states that the consumer codes are to be developed by the peak industry association in consultation with other stakeholders of the internet industry (Communications Alliance, 2013). The consumer protection code governing vILSPs is the Telecommunications Consumer Protection (TCP) Code. The code is developed, reviewed and revised by the industry association in consultation with external stakeholders such as the regulator (ACMA), the ombudsman (TIO), the consumer association (ACCAN), the government department for responsible for broadband (Department of Communications) and the top four vILSPs. Once the code is developed, it is registered with the regulator and comes into effect. The old TCP code (TCP code 2007) was revised in 2010/11 and the revised TCP code (TCP code 2012) came into effect on 1 September 2012 (Communications Alliance, 2013). Detailed information on the history of co-regulation on consumer protection in Australia is available in Havyatt (2010a).

**An Institutional Perspective to Understand External Stakeholder Pressures Influencing CS/CH Practices of the Internet Industry**

Institutional theory was used as a theoretical framework to study the role of external stakeholder pressures in influencing CS/CH practices of vILSPs. Institutional theory posits that organisations not only compete for technical efficiency but also organisational legitimacy. Legitimacy is defined as “a perception that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed systems of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). The main thrust of this theory is that organisational practices are influenced by the external environment in which they operate and the organisational choices are constrained and influenced by social behaviours, values and norms in their external environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).
An increasing number of studies (Gunningham & Rees, 1997; Bjorck, 2004; Major & Hopper, 2005; Hu, Hart & Cooke, 2006; Lee, Ginn & Naylor, 2009) have highlighted the institutional influences on organisational practices. For example, Hu, Hart and Cooke (2006) investigated the role of external influences on organisational Information Security (ISec) practices. They found that the introduction of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (United States of America) changed the management attitudes towards ISec policies (compliance with regulation was the key driver for the change). Lee, Ginn and Naylor’s (2009) study revealed that regulatory forces stifled service innovation in the services industry. Bjorck (2004) investigated why formal security structures and actual security behaviour differed on ISec practices. His work sheds light on why organisations create and maintain formal ISec policies without implementing them fully. Taken together, these studies revealed that external constituents have an important role to play in influencing industry practices. Detailed information on institutional theory is available in DiMaggio and Powell (1983).

Havyatt (2010b) states that the “industry’s reputation for poor customer service has been much commented on but little analysed” (p. 11.1). Institutional theory was chosen to study the pressures that stakeholders exert on the vlISP industry, understand what pressures influence the attitude of vlISP regulatory managers towards CS/CH improvements, and to critically examine how and why vlISPs respond to such pressures. The main research question investigated was: In what ways do external stakeholder pressures influence CS/CH practices of the vlISP industry? A qualitative research methodology using semi-structured interviews was chosen for this study. Table 1 provides further information on study participant recruitment, profiles of organisations, participants and the data analysis approach used.

**Major Findings**

*Why the Old TCP Code Failed to Deliver Acceptable CS/CH Outcomes in the vlISP Industry*

All the participants acknowledged several shortcomings in the old TCP code. The data analysis revealed that the study participants were explicitly involved in the development, review and revision of the TCP code. There was consensus among participants that the old TCP code did not deliver acceptable CS/CH outcomes in the industry. The key reasons were the industry’s failure to enforce code conformance, failure to encourage continuous improvement of CS/CH practices, and inadequate guidance to deal with new/emerging consumer issues. For example, the regulator executive P4 explicitly discussed the need for ongoing collaboration amongst stakeholders to improve the code so it supports delivery of satisfactory outcomes for consumers. Further, P4 described the extensive dialogue, discussion and negotiation that occurred during the code review in 2010/2011 to address the CS/CH shortcomings in the old TCP code.

*How was regulatory compliance assessed in the old TCP code?* Regulatory compliance in the internet industry refers to ISPs acting in accordance with their external obligations (TCP code) and in doing so they reflect their organisational structure, processes, policies and procedures to meet those obligations (Communications Alliance, 2013). The data analysis found that the regulator considers a number of factors when assessing code compliance. First, the TIO complaints data plays an important role in assessing compliance as it provides information about possible code issues, confirmed code breaches and systemic CS/CH issues. Second, the number of individual consumers expressing their frustration about their provider to the regulator is an indication of customer dissatisfaction. Third, repeated complaints about a provider from their customer base triggered interest of the regulator to formally investigate the matter.
Participants were selected based on the information available on websites of vILSPs, industry association and government agencies. Participants had experience ranging between seven and 40 years in dealing with consumer issues, regulatory affairs and were the point of contact between their organisation and the external agencies. Purposive sampling was used as participants in key positions were required for obtaining the right perspective on the topic.

Internet service issues for Australian residential customers.

Collectively, they have close to 80% of the residential internet subscriber base; are board members of various external stakeholders such as the regulator and the ombudsman; are members of broadband policy formulation committees; and interact with the government department responsible for broadband on a frequent basis. Their ‘visibility’ in the market place means their practices are under increased scrutiny by external stakeholders and the media.

Qualitative research using a semi-structured interview method was used (11 senior executives from key stakeholder agencies were interviewed between November 2011 and October 2012).

Consumer Association (O1): Senior executive of consumer association representing telecommunication consumers in Australia. Has decades of experience on consumer issues (P1).

Telecommunications Industry Consultant (O2): A telecommunications veteran with more than 30 years’ experience in working for major telecommunication companies in the past. Currently provides advice on regulatory compliance to big players and is involved in industry association code review activities (P2).

Industry Association (O3): Senior executive from ISP industry association responsible for developing the TCP code. Has decades of experience in the telecommunications industry (P3).

Australian Telecommunications Regulator (O4): Regulatory executive involved in TCP code development and enforcement (P4).

Australian Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (O5): Ombudsman executive with extensive experience in handling CS and CH issues. Manages four functional teams in this organisation (P5).

Very large ISP 1 (O6): Regulatory manager of a national ISP based in Melbourne. Has decades of experience in regulatory affairs. Another executive assists him on regulatory compliance matters (Two participants: P6a, P6b).

Very large ISP 2 (O7): Regulatory manager of a national ISP based in Melbourne. Has more than 30 years’ experience in regulatory affairs area (P7).

Very large ISP 3 (O8): Regulatory manager of a national ISP based in Western Australia. Has more than 40 years’ experience in the telecommunications industry (P8).

Very large ISP 4 (O9): Customer knowledge manager of a national ISP based in Melbourne. Manages the call centres for this ISP. Has several years of experience in dealing with CS/CH issues (P9).

Australian Government Department for Broadband (O10): Senior executive managing the consumer engagement division of the department with extensive consumer affairs experience (P10).

A thematic data analysis approach was used (Creswell, 2007). Categories and themes that emerged have been detailed in Vilapakkam Nagarajan (2012).

**Table 1** – Research approach used in this study

How effective was the regulator’s role in code enforcement? P4 confirmed their active role in directing the industry players to comply with the code when they see a spike in complaints. In the old TCP code, the regulator can enforce the code only if they identify an area of non-compliance. This directive occurs when a provider has been reported for systemic CS/CH issues and confirmed code breaches by the ombudsman. The lack of strong enforcement and monitoring mechanisms meant that providers were not truly motivated to demonstrate compliance with the old TCP code as there were no penalties associated with non-compliance. The providers also had no explicit legal obligation as they were not signatories to the code. P10 argues that this has led to a “race to the bottom” on CS.

This raises an interesting question: Did the lack of strong enforcement in the old TCP code lead to vILSPs superficially conforming to the code?
There were differing perspectives from participants on this question. For example, P3 dismisses the view that vlISPs demonstrated superficial compliance with the old TCP code. While this notion is not applicable to all players as some of them have adopted a ‘beyond compliance’ approach (for example, O8 has won several CS excellence awards), it raises questions as to why there is a contradiction in the actual behaviour of vlISPs. P7 openly acknowledged that the industry was inadequately monitoring its own code and compliance measures. This view is also supported by P1, P4 and P5. Another view expressed by P9 describes instances where providers claimed that they were compliant with the code despite an increase in the number of complaints registered with the ombudsman. All these views point to a serious failure of the old TCP code in relation to code compliance and monitoring.

The findings suggest that vlISPs adopted the old TCP as they saw fit or on a ceremonial basis to maintain certain outward appearances and demonstrate compliance while their actual behaviour on CS/CH practices differed. Such behaviours raise serious concerns for CS reputation of the vlISP industry. If vlISPs are not transparent about their compliance mechanisms and fail to demonstrate that their existing CS/CH practices go ‘beyond compliance’ (i.e. the business focuses on doing more than the minimum requirements on CS/CH practices), it raises serious questions about their genuine commitment to CS/CH practices. It is also suggestive that many vlISPs see investment in CS as a cost factor as opposed to a profit factor.

External Pressures in the Australian vlISP Industry and its Influence on CS/CH Practices

Williams, Lueg, Taylor and Cook (2009) studied pressures that influence industry practices in a co-regulatory arrangement. They define: regulatory pressure as “a force, persuasion, or invitation that is applied both implicitly and explicitly by governmental agencies, which is adopted to comply or avoid sanctioning” (p. 608); customer pressure as “a force, persuasion, or invitation that is applied both implicitly and explicitly by customers to which firms must respond” (p. 609); and competitor pressure as “the pressure applied by the competitive marketplace creating the desire to appear similar to others by mimicking structures, practices, or outputs” (p. 609).

To understand external pressures in the vlISP industry, the study data was analysed using the framework proposed by Oliver (1991), which focuses on five key questions in analysing pressures:

- Why the pressures were exerted?
- Who was exerting them?
- What these pressures are?
- By what means were they exerted?
- Where did they occur?

These are discussed in detail in Vilapakkam Nagarajan (2012). All participants acknowledged the influential role of external pressures in influencing CS/CH practices of the vlISP industry. There were differing perspectives in terms of the level of influence of these pressures. The vlISPs and industry association considered external pressures to be secondary drivers in influencing the CS/CH practices, while the external stakeholders such as the ombudsman, consumer association and the regulator consider them as primary drivers in bringing CS/CH improvements within vlISPs. A further critical examination of the participant responses revealed that there were both individual and collective responses to pressures by vlISPs, providing compelling evidence that regulatory pressure was the primary driver in influencing vlISP regulatory manager attitudes towards CS/CH improvements. Table A (see Appendix) analyses pressures based on the study interview participant responses. Sample quotes on pressures in the vlISP industry are available in Table B (Appendix). The discussion will now focus on individual participant perspectives on key pressures that they believe influence the CS/CH practices of the vlISP industry.

P1 and P8 commented that vlISPs who were under-performing in CS/CH areas came under increasing pressure from providers such as O8 who excelled in CS. O8’s reputation for CS, organisation-wide focus
on CS initiatives and mechanisms used for tracking CS drew the attention of the other providers. P8 provided an example of how the CS measurement tool known as Net Promoter Score (NPS) used by his organisation was considered by another vlISP O9 to review their CS/CH practices.

P3 regards competition as the primary pressure in influencing the vlISP attitude towards CS/CH practices. He acknowledges that other pressures, such as the pressure from the regulator (enforcement/direction to comply) and government agencies (ministerial intervention), also play a role in influencing CS/CH practices of the industry. According to him, the real threat of tighter regulation and ministerial intervention in the recent past played a key role in bringing vlISPs together to quickly act in failed areas of the consumer code. He attributes this to the vlISPs’ fear of tighter regulation and their preference to be masters of their own destiny rather than allow the regulator to impose stringent regulation.

P2 states that in a co-regulatory environment the regulatory managers of vlISPs are keen to satisfy the needs of the external entities such as the regulator, the ombudsman and the consumer association to avoid tighter regulation, seek legitimacy and influence practices. He states that the pressure that will work effectively in such an environment is pressure from the regulator threatening more regulation. P2 recommends that the regulator appreciates and publicises ISPs who excel in CS, rather than publicising bad performers. He argues that, by pointing to good players in the market, the regulator is able to drive and generate competition pressures that are likely to deliver right outcomes for the customers.

P4 is of the view that pressures from the regulator, customers and competitors excelling in CS played influential roles in both making significant improvements to the TCP code and bringing in new CS initiatives within vlISPs. The regulator executive shares other participant views that vlISPs prefer co-regulation with strong enforcement than direct regulations. She further adds that the real threat of tighter regulation played a dominant role in influencing the attitude of regulatory managers of vlISPs in addressing the CS/CH shortcomings in the old TCP code and paying serious attention to various stakeholder concerns related to CS/CH.

The vlISP executives P6, P7, P8 and P9 acknowledge customer pressure as a key driver in influencing their CS/CH practices. According to them CS is important for their business success now and for a future NBN environment. All vlISPs acknowledged the influential role of the regulator, the ombudsman and consumer advocates in pressuring the vlISP industry as a whole to improve their CS reputation. The vlISPs responded to such pressures to avoid increase in scrutiny, repair CS/CH legitimacy, avoid excessive regulation and influence practices that suit their collective interests.

In summary, the increased regulatory activities in 2010/2011, and the real threat of tighter regulation combined with customer and competitive pressures in the recent past (2010/2011), led to vlISPs paying more attention to stakeholder CS/CH concerns and acceding to stakeholder demands in addressing shortcomings in the old TCP code. The collective pressures exerted by external stakeholders led to increased collaboration and engagement between the vlISPs and other industry stakeholders. This led to significant changes in the revised TCP code with a clear focus on achieving better CS/CH outcomes for consumers (Vilapakkan Nagarajan, 2012). The next section discusses the role of pressures in influencing the compliance mechanisms in the revised TCP code.

The Influence of External Pressures on Improvements to the Compliance Mechanisms in the Revised TCP Code

This section focuses on three key questions: What led to the need for new compliance initiatives in the revised TCP code? What are the new compliance initiatives in the revised TCP code? How are the new initiatives likely to drive the desired behaviour in the vlISP industry in relation to code compliance?

The data analysis revealed that there were several ‘trigger events’ (Meyer, Gaba & Colwell, 2005; Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Ganad, 2008) that led to the introduction of new compliance initiatives in the revised TCP
code. Two important trigger events are relevant. The regulator inquiry (Reconnecting the Customer (RTC), known as the RTC inquiry; see ACMA, 2011) was an 18-month investigation into the CS/CH practices of the industry. This inquiry identified systemic CS/CH issues, including absence of clear monitoring, reporting and strong enforcement measures in the old TCP code that led to industry-wide poor attitudes towards CS improvements. As a result the providers used the TIO scheme as a de facto mechanism to handle complaints instead of making a genuine attempt to address the source of the complaints and improve CS experiences. The timing of the code revision (the TCP code was due for review in 2010) along with the regulator’s RTC inquiry, multiple stakeholder concerns regarding systemic CS/CH failures, high media profile of the problem, ministerial intervention and the ombudsman campaign, triggered heated debate among stakeholders on CS/CH practices. Collectively, these events placed increased pressure on vlISPs to strengthen compliance and enforcement mechanisms during the code revision. The industry believed that they faced a real threat of tighter regulation if they failed to address their stakeholder concerns. As a result, the ISP industry association significantly increased its member education activities in relation to code revision and compliance issues, and sought closer collaboration with external stakeholders to discuss and address the CS/CH concerns.

P3 from the ISP industry association acknowledged that most of the shortcomings in the old TCP code were addressed during the code review process and that a draft code was submitted to the regulator months in advance of the RTC inquiry report being published. He argues that the industry was not simply parroting to the RTC recommendations because they did not exist at the time code revisions occurred. It is acknowledged that the ISP industry association played a key role in making significant changes to the code with input from a number of stakeholders. Twenty out of the 21 RTC initial inquiry recommendations were incorporated by the industry association into the revised TCP code. This re-emphasises the earlier argument that the timing of events, collective pressures from external stakeholders and a real threat of tighter regulation all played a crucial role to increase the vlISPs commitment to the code revision process. The ombudsman executive P5 and consumer association executive P1 acknowledged that the RTC inquiry and its recommendations assisted with securing the commitment from vlISPs and keeping the discussion regarding code revisions very focused on the central issues.

Several new initiatives related to compliance were addressed in the revised TCP code. The introduction of a Communications Compliance (CC) committee was an important achievement. This committee is an independent committee that has been established under the revised TCP code to monitor code compliance. The revised TCP code specifies that all providers need to submit mandatory compliance statements to CC and demonstrate that they have systems and processes to be able to comply. The providers are also required to submit their compliance activities against a list of metrics developed by the CC. The industry consultant P2 appreciated the strong enforcement power that CC and the regulator now have in relation to compliance. Another key initiative led by the industry association in relation to code compliance is evidenced through the series of compliance workshops that it runs for its members. Such workshops educate providers on how to demonstrate compliance with the revised TCP code.

Will the newly formed independent body CC drive the right behaviour in the industry to demonstrate compliance with the code? Several participant perspectives exist. The government executive P10 believes that the more power and resources CC has for the code enforcement the better it is to drive the right behaviour in the industry. A vlISP executive P7 strongly believes that the CC has powers to raise questions and conduct investigations in relation to compliance. According to P7 the revised TCP code with its higher threshold on CS/CH and improved compliance framework will deliver compliant outcomes in CS/CH areas. Further, the new compliance measures in the revised TCP code will lead to better transparency in relation to code compliance. It is also expected that there will be an increased involvement of company senior management in compliance matters due to high threshold/standards within the revised TCP code and the stringent requirements the code places on the providers to demonstrate their compliance (see Appendix, Table C for sample quotes). According to P7 this transparency with compliance is expected to deliver good CS/CH outcomes. Such an argument is consistent with previous findings (Hu et al., 2006; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Major & Hopper, 2005) that have shown that organisations thrive.
for legal legitimacy and the key drive for change in organisation behaviour and attitude towards industry practices is the compliance with regulation.

**Conclusion and Future Work**

CS/CH performance of the vlISP industry has important economic, social, financial and business implications for vlISP businesses as well as internet consumers. The study results show that a combination of pressures from external stakeholders resulted in an increase in frequent and fateful interactions and collaboration amongst all the stakeholders. This has resulted in some important revisions to the TCP code particularly in relation to the CS, CH and code compliance sections of the code. The actual CS/CH performance of the vlISP industry following the recent revisions to the code and code implementation remains to be seen. Preliminary results from O7 and an ACMA media release (2013) indicate that the CS/CH performance of providers has improved since the code came into effect in September 2012. Having a strong code monitoring and enforcement mechanism alone is inadequate to securing good CS/CH performance. Ongoing stakeholder collaboration is crucial to address any new and emerging CS issues that may be relevant for current and future CS/CH practices and consumer protection. Future quantitative studies are essential to examine the influence of external stakeholder pressures discussed in this paper on the actual CS/CH performance of the vlISPs.

**Acknowledgements**

The author thanks all industry participants for their participation in this study.

**References**


**About the Author**

Karthik Nagarajan is a telecommunications engineer and holds a research degree in ICT from the University of Wollongong. He has more than 12 years collective experience in research, management, coordination and teaching in ICT and Business at four Australian Universities. In 2011-2012 he was involved in a collaborative research project between University of Wollongong and ACCAN titled ‘Accessible Communications: Tapping the Potential in Public ICT Procurement Policy’. His research interests include telecommunications consumer protection policies, institutional theory, technology-based service industries and ICT accessibility. He is pursuing his PhD at the University of Western Sydney. His doctoral thesis investigates the role of institutional pressures in influencing customer service and complaints handling practices of the Australian internet industry. His research work has been published in local and international conferences.
### Appendix

**Table A – Analysis of pressures in the Australian viISP Industry based on interview participant responses using ideas from Oliver (1991) framework**

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<td>Pressure from the regulator</td>
<td>Enforcement action on individual providers who failed to address systemic CS/CH issues and were reported by the ombudsman. ACMA Reconnecting the Customer (RTC) inquiry on CS/CH practices. Regulator forums and town hall meetings on consumer issues. Media release by the minister calling on the industry to address CS/CH issues as a matter of urgency. Minister appearing on radio/TV channels threatening further regulation if the industry failed to lift their CS/CH performance. Minister’s speech in regulator forums, consumer association annual conference. RTC inquiry recommendations incorporated into the revised TCP code. viISPs acknowledged that the old code had numerous shortcomings and were willing to address those shortcomings during the code revision process. Tighter timeframes for acknowledging complaints and resolution (within two days and resolved within three weeks). The need to inform customers of complaint outcomes. A new definition of ‘complaint’ that requires ISPs, where uncertain, to ask if their customers wish to make a complaint. The need to provide customers a unique complaint reference number that allows them to track a complaint.</td>
<td>Independent compliance committee known as Communications Compliance (CC) to monitor the compliance activities. This includes monitoring individual ISPs on the CS metrics and benchmarking standards developed by this committee. Mandatory submission of code compliance statements. Statement of independent assessment to CC. Compliance report in a format required by CC against a list of CS metrics. Comply with directions from CC consistent with code obligations. The enforcement actions against ISPs who are not complying include the regulator directing the ISP to comply with code; if a direction is breached, the regulator can issue an infringement notice, seek civil penalties up to 250,000 in the federal court or accept enforceable undertakings.</td>
<td>Provision of more and clearer information about products before point of sale - ‘Summary of Offer’ document.</td>
<td>Increased accountability of staff on CS and CH in viISPs. Bringing in structural changes within organisation to prioritise CS, implement sound evidence-based CS practices and convince diverse stakeholders that their organisation is not a ‘bad apple’. Cultural change by CEO of O7 that embraces the concept that everything the staff does must have customer as focus of what they do. Increased focus on avoiding complaints rather than dealing with them. Appointment of executives to bring new CS initiatives.</td>
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<td>External stakeholder pressures (2009-2012)</td>
<td>By what means pressures were exerted?</td>
<td>Revised TCP Code</td>
<td>Penalties and enforcement mechanisms in the revised TCP code</td>
<td>Complexity of products and services issue addressed in the revised TCP code</td>
<td>Organisation culture and senior management attitude towards CS/CH practices</td>
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<td>Connect.Resolve campaign in 2009 and 2010 that targeted top ten ISPs to drive down complaint numbers.</td>
<td>ConnectResolve campaign in 2009 and 2010 that targeted top ten ISPs to drive down complaint numbers.</td>
<td>Assisted the code review working committee to understand systemic CS/CH issues and work collaboratively to address those issues.</td>
<td>Ombudsman pressuring the industry to develop stringent enforcement measures in the revised TCP code.</td>
<td>The increased complaint numbers on point of sale matters involving internet services published by the ombudsman in its annual report led to increased attention on the pre-sale section of the code.</td>
<td>CEO of vIISPs paying more attention to nature of complaints.</td>
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<td>Ombudsman Resilient Consumer research report that studied consumer resilience in relation to ISP handling of customer complaints.</td>
<td>Ombudsman Resilient Consumer research report that studied consumer resilience in relation to ISP handling of customer complaints.</td>
<td>Boosted seriousness of CS/CH problems.</td>
<td>Ombudsman pressuring industry to incorporate the regulator RTC inquiry recommendations on compliance in the revised TCP code.</td>
<td>The increased complaint numbers on point of sale matters involving internet services published by the ombudsman in its annual report led to increased attention on the pre-sale section of the code.</td>
<td>The customer relationship managers of vIISPs who interacted with ombudsman during the Connect.Resolve campaign were able to bring in new CH initiatives within their organisation by reviewing the monthly complaints statistics provided by the ombudsman.</td>
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<td>Annual complaint reports, quarterly complaints statistics published in 2008-2011 that highlighted steady increase in complaints involving CS and CH taking into consideration the proportion of complaints against the number of subscribers.</td>
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<td>Take a proactive approach to avoiding complaints rather than dealing with them.</td>
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<td>Pressure from consumer association</td>
<td>Consumer research reports that highlighted customer frustration in dealing with their providers to resolve their issues (e.g. independent survey they commissioned through Galaxy research in 2011). Consumer association annual conference that had special CS forums to address rising complaints numbers in the ISP industry. Media releases by consumer association. Increased profile of the problem in the media (consumer association executive publicly criticising the industry for its failure to improve CS experiences in mainstream TV channel).</td>
<td>Unprecedented improvements to various chapters within the code that were driving customer complaints (e.g. CH, bill shock, usage).</td>
<td>Strong enforcement mechanisms in the revised TCP code.</td>
<td>Contributed to significant improvements in relation to product disclosure.</td>
<td>Frequent meetings between regulatory managers of vILSPs that led to increased collaboration, cooperation, dialogue and discussion on CS/CH issues. Cultural change within vILSPs to prioritise CS.</td>
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<td>Pressures from ISPs excelling in CS</td>
<td>Media releases calling on the industry to lift their CS/CH performance. CEO of company excelling in CS calling on other players to lift their game to avoid tighter regulation.</td>
<td>Bring in ‘beyond compliance’ initiatives in the revised TCP code.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Standardisation of practices in the revised TCP code (e.g. ‘Summary of Offer’).</td>
<td>Calling on other vILSPs to change their attitude towards CS and view investment in CS as a profit factor rather than a cost factor.</td>
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### External pressures

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<th>External pressures</th>
<th>Sample interview participant quotes [P]</th>
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<td>Pressure from competitors excelling on customer service</td>
<td>“I’m aware - I have seen a copy of an internal memo that &lt;O9&gt; circulated, which was an analysis of &lt;O8&gt; and what it was doing in relation to its customer service and it’s clear that they, I think, were looking to see if they could learn anything from what we did and the way we operated in order to apply it to their own business. I had a conversation with some &lt;O7&gt; staff who also claim … that they were using NPS as well … I think there are people now, more and more companies looking at this NPS because we’ve given it a fair bit of publicity. We quite happily will go out there and talk about it and we’re quite happy for the rest of the industry to lift its game” [P8].</td>
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<td>“Yeah, I mean, I can’t give specific examples but when you go and talk to them they’re all aware of what [O8] is doing and [O8] now sits on the Ombudsman board and they play an influential role even though they’re not in the whole industry, even though they’re not a very big player compared to like [O9] or [O7]” [P1].</td>
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<td>Pressure from ISP customers</td>
<td>“It’s important to recognise that we put a considerable amount of effort into talking to and listening to customers ourselves. We have an extensive program of not only analysing complaint data that we receive as well as the &lt;ombudsman&gt; complaint data but also an extensive program of listening to our consultants talking to customers. We go back and talk to our customers after they’ve had a transaction with us and seek their feedback. It’s that voice of the customer that is the key driver of changes to our behaviour. We obviously are very cognisant of the role those agencies have and we listen to what they tell us but I wouldn’t want to suggest that they are the key driver of our behaviour. It’s our customers, our engagement. I spoke about customer satisfaction. That’s all about us listening to our customers, what they’re telling us, what’s working, what’s not working. We put a great deal of effort into doing that” [P7].</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pressure from regulator</td>
<td>“Timing is one word for it, yes. So I went to &lt;regulator executive&gt; right at the outset and I said, well you said you’ve got views and thoughts, please put them on paper and give them to us. There were 21 initial recommendations that the &lt;regulator&gt; put to us, to include in the code. We ended up incorporating 20 of those 21. The 21st, it was impossible to incorporate because it referred to something which didn’t exist. So we have been strongly responsive to the &lt;regulator&gt;. We also implemented elsewhere the recommendations from the RTC inquiry, which I think is a useful sign as well. We have included the &lt;regulator&gt; on the steering group that governs the process. We have consulted regularly with their staff and with their Chair … and with the authority itself. I’ve had several meetings and workshops with staff and authority members as we’ve been thrashing through the detail of recommendations … So the engagement has been sustained and broad and deep” [P3].</td>
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<td>Pressure from ombudsman</td>
<td>“What led to the campaign was I think two things, the first was this fairly exponential growth in complaints in absolute numbers terms and the second was the high proportion of customer service and complaint handling issues that we were observing as part of those complaints. Our previous Ombudsman, &lt;name&gt; decided that really a targeted campaign was the best way to firstly try and shed light on the issues but secondly, to try and work with the providers collaboratively to try and bring this ratio of complaints down and particularly try and address those customer service and complaint handling issues that had been picked up. So it was run for a period of six months. The providers concerned that the 10 providers were given advanced briefings of the campaign; this is what we’re going to be measuring. We’re going to be giving you regular updates on the numbers that are coming through our scheme and we’re interested in working with you to help develop any kind of mechanisms that might improve things” [P5].</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competition pressures</td>
<td>“The force that outstrips all of those is the pressure of competition. This is a very competitive market. Customers are mobile in the internet space and they are looking for a better deal. So apart from any of the other factors you mentioned, all of which are important and significant, it’s the power of competition that drives the actions” [P3].</td>
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<tr>
<td>External pressures</td>
<td>Sample interview participant quotes [P]</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pressure from consumer association</td>
<td>“There has been just simply the public and media outcry over the rising complaints that industry really are on the nose and they need to do something about it, so that’s been a pressure I think the &lt;regulator&gt; inquiry has been appreciating. I think also having &lt;consumer association&gt; on the actual steering committee has been another pressure because &lt;consumer association&gt; have been quite forceful in trying to push for various things and there’s been a number of heated meetings. You only have to read &lt;industry association&gt; submission to the &lt;consumer association&gt; review to see that, where they’ve complained in fact that they thought that &lt;consumer association&gt; were perhaps too pushy and aggressive in the way in which they carried out their role there. So I think there’s been a number of things there that have put a lot of pressure on industry to do better” [P10].</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pressure from government department for broadband</td>
<td>“There has been strong and understandable political and regulatory pressure on these topics, as you would expect to happen when you see the sorts of difficulties and issues that have been thrown up and indicated by some of the complaint volumes. So, I mean the minister … has said repeatedly, he’s probably said it more often than he wanted to have to say it. That unless the industry can pull its act together and can put measures in place and self-regulatory and co-regulatory steps in place to address the issues, he will come over the top in a not particularly subtle way and impose legislative or regulatory constraints that serve to generate that type of behaviour. The &lt;regulator&gt; has said similar things. It’s said exactly that when launching its RTC inquiry also in about May last year. So I think that all that pressure from regulators and from politicians is not surprising and I think in most cases, not unhelpful” [P3].</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pressures on vILSPs in an NBN environment</td>
<td>“Well I think the TCP Code is a code that would, it’s not technology specific and I mean I think it’s meant to respond to any type of network or service someone might get. I don’t think the NBN changes that in any way. I think the NBN does bring about different pressures and that is, as we’ve discussed, the ubiquity of service offering. So at the moment people can differentiate on technology and they can say, well our service is better than your service because we’ve got better network. I think when the network’s the same, and the pricing is the same, what else do you differentiate other than is it bundling different services, content and so forth or indeed customer service and mere reputation in the market. The other pressure that will be brought to bear there, I suspect is non-telco providers providing services on the NBN and we’re already seeing some signs of that. You might have someone like &lt;supermarket&gt;, or someone who traditionally hasn’t been in the telco space thinking, well, I can provide that role and someone can get a loyalty card and buy groceries from &lt;supermarket&gt; and get an internet service. Now, I think that provides a very strong impetus and threat to industry to pull up their socks, but, and we are starting to see it. I think &lt;O7&gt; someone, again, who has woken up to this and thought, well, gee whiz, at the moment we can back off the fact that we’ve got the ADSL network, the copper network, but when that goes well, what can we bank off. So we’ve got to do more in customer service and consolidate our reputation in the market, otherwise we’re going to have our market share taken away from us” [P10].</td>
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Table C – Sample quotes on compliance mechanisms in the revised TCP code

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<tr>
<th>Compliance Mechanism</th>
<th>Sample interview participant quotes [P]</th>
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<td>Independent compliance body in the revised TCP code to monitor code compliance</td>
<td>“This current code - the industry has committed to set up its own monitoring body called Communications Compliance. That body will be empowered to seek reports from all of the industry members about their compliance with that particular code. It will have powers to ask questions and investigate if necessary. Where a participant hasn’t responded to those requests, then they’ll be submitted off to the regulator to take necessary action. So we think that combined with raising the rules of the roads, as I said before and making a higher threshold, together with improved compliance framework, it will, one hopes, drive the right behaviour in the industry to deliver better compliant outcome both in complaint handling and customer service” [P7].</td>
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<td>Increased involvement of senior management on compliance in the revised TCP code</td>
<td>“What we anticipate coming out of the new code and the new code compliance framework is that industry’s compliance with the code would be more transparent. One of the things we’re wanting to do is to have this new communications compliance group get reports from the various participants saying, I’m complying. It’s important to recognize that the bigger players, like us, will have to have a third-party assessment that their statement of compliance is reasonable against the Australian Standard for Compliance Programs. It’s also important to realize that before we submit it, someone like our CEO has to put his name to it. So it’s quite a high threshold before you assert you’re compliant. Communications compliance will then publish that statement of compliance and it will say on a public website that &lt;ISP X&gt; says it’s compliant … So imagine if you’re a supplier and your name is not on that list? The general public will come to the conclusion, oh, I’m not going to deal with that supplier because it’s not on the list” [P7].</td>
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“It Makes Them Streetwise”
What Parents and Children Tell Themselves and Each Other About Young People’s Activities Online

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Abstract
Parents and children both construct narratives around what young people do online and why, and how they respond to these circumstances. As one mother says:

You can’t hide them from things like Facebook, and it makes them streetwise. They have friends that are not allowed to use it, but their mums pick them up from school and drop them off and they are not learning any life skills.

This project investigates parents’ and children’s understandings of young people’s online activities in terms of the costs, benefits, advantages and concerns. The aim of the project is to interrogate domestic negotiations around online activities for high school-aged children, including the negotiations within the household and the impact of peer activity both upon those negotiations and upon the young person’s internet use. Parents have traditionally constructed digital technology as an educational resource and the skills involved in mastering its potential as indicative of career-oriented capabilities. Children have constructed the same technologies as games machines and tools for engineering sociability. But there is some evidence that each appreciates the perspective of the other and works to accommodate it while trying to encourage the adoption of an and-also model, rather than one that prefers either-or. This paper draws upon early findings from 2013 data and uses the voices of participants to illustrate the nuances of the negotiations around meaning and importance attributed both to the technology and to its uses.

Keywords: parents; peers; risk; family life; mobile access; social network sites

Introduction
Since the mid-1990s, social network sites and mobile cultures have opened up new communicative spaces and repertoires (Goggin, 2006), which are particularly attractive to young people, especially older school children (Donald & Spry, 2007). While there has been an increasing volume of research into social network site (SNS) use, such as Facebook (e.g. boyd, 2007), there have been few ethnographies that locate children’s online risk-taking, or skills-enhancing, behaviour within the dual contextual dynamics of the household and family life, and their peer group. Acknowledging a number of studies of teens and risk in a variety of contexts (e.g. Lupton, 1999; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Marwick & boyd, 2011), few of these engage the perspectives and address the relative influence of both peers and parents. With regard to risk, parents are particularly implicated since policymakers, law enforcers and the media target parents to tell them that their children face dangers in the online environment, especially from cyber predators, some of whom have been caught purporting to be children themselves (Durber, 2006). Parents may feel compelled...
to ‘police’ their children’s online activities but such actions raise anew issues of trust, autonomy, privacy and surveillance within the family unit, as well as impacting upon the relationships of children within their peer groups. This paper addresses the perspective of both parents and children, but deals in slightly more depth with the parental perspective.

Methodological Approach

The conceptual framework within which this research is conducted is that of the ‘social construction’ of meaning (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Social constructionism argues that what we say and believe about society, together and separately, not only reflects our experience but helps to create our society as we experience it. According to this conceptual approach, we are jointly engaged in the process of constructing our experience of ‘the social’ through our interactions with each other, with objects in the world, and through the discourses we use to discuss these. Tools used in this project, such as discourse analysis (DA) (Fairclough, 2009), allow us to ‘undo the social’ (Game, 1991) so that we may more readily analyse the ways in which what we say and do help us construct our experience and perform identity (White & Wyn, 2008).

This paper uses interviews with two teenagers from different families (a girl, 13, ‘Bec’, and a boy, 14, ‘Clint’) and the parent most involved with overseeing their internet access. In both cases, the child’s mother volunteered this as her role and this was confirmed by the child’s other parent (in Bec’s case) and by the child (in Clint’s case). The families were recruited through schools, following relevant ethics processes, and both live in peri-urban locations on the outskirts of metropolitan Perth. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews took place in the child’s mother’s home and lasted an average of 45 minutes each. Teen and parent were each interviewed separately, but on the same research visit. The two families are not known to each other and these interviews are part of a larger cohort of 18 interviews conducted in January 2013, with a further 40 or so to be completed in 2014. This paper accordingly constitutes something of a pilot study of preliminary data collected in the first stages of the ‘parents and peers’ project.

The research has encountered a range of recruitment issues, and the major selection criteria for these participants was reduced to a child with a strong engagement with the internet via, for example, games, fan fiction, and/or a social network site, plus a parent who is also willing to be interviewed. Our hope remains to access one or more groups of children and groups of parents to add depth to discussions around peers and parents managing group activities. The richness of the data gathered in individual interviews, however, means that this paper focuses upon the contribution of four participants: Bec and her mother, and Clint and his mother. Parental ages were not collected but Bec’s mother appears to be in her 30s, while Clint’s seems to be in her 40s. Both are partnered. Clint’s household enjoys a middle-class lifestyle although there is currently some financial stress around renting while looking for a home to buy. Bec’s household appears to be lower/middle-class and both parents work. Participants’ names and some identifying aspects of these interviews have been changed to protect privacy.

A paper based on a small sample has both benefits and disadvantages. Benefits include the in-depth consideration of a small number of cases which allows a reader greater opportunity to consider the detail of the research findings in the context of the richness and depth of his/her own experience. Small (2009) identifies as a predicament the challenge faced by qualitative researchers to keep “at bay the critiques expected from quantitative researchers while also addressing the thirst for in-depth studies that somehow or other ‘speak’ to empirical conditions in other cases (not observed)” (p. 10, original emphasis). In the case of this paper, there is no intention to “speak to empirical conditions in other cases”, but to instead uncover details about both the communication and metacommunication between parents and their children as these relate to wider relationship issues as represented through children’s new media use.

Apart from impossibility of generalising from them, other disadvantages of a small N study include the unrepresentative nature of a small sample, and the distorting effect of minority perspectives. As Denscombe (2010) notes:
An outlier will have less of a distorting impact on a large sample than it will on a small sample, because the extent of its deviation from the rest will get subdivided more and more as the sample size gets bigger. (p. 248)

This is a particularly relevant concern given one specific dimension of Clint’s family’s experience. Clint has a diagnosis of Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD), and this has relevance in the context of some of his mother’s comments. CAPD can present as being similar to Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and the overlap arises because people with both diagnoses are less able to synthesise multiple sources of information and may appear to act impulsively in social contexts. A person with CAPD might say or do something after a discussion has moved onto other topics, and thus appear to act out of context. They might also find it harder to review and validate arguments for or against certain decisions based upon information in the communicative environment.

Data used for this paper are selected from full-text in-depth one-on-one interviews (Seidman, 2006). These data are coded to identify themes and concepts using grounded theory approaches (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Riley, 1996), while the multiple perspectives of the two sets of parents and teenaged children help triangulate findings. Discourse is made accessible for analysis through ethnomethodological (Garfinkel, 1967) research techniques, which suggest that how people use language indicates the deeper structures of belief and understanding which underpin their daily lives. Paying attention to metacommunication, how people use language and the examples they offer, helps reveal detail about how interviewees intend their primary statements to be interpreted. In the case of this pilot project with four interviewees, DA approaches (Choi & Fairclough, 1999) reveal assumptions and beliefs that impact upon constructions of online opportunities and threats, and the safe or risky ways in which individuals and families relate to new media. The relational metacommunication (Branco, 2005) exchanges discussed in this paper address the broad issues of family life and the hopes and fears that parents hold for their children.

Costs and Benefits of Online Activities

Family choices around enabling access to new media express their values and their perspective on life as is made clear in studies of, for example, media use in Amish households (Umble & Weaver-Zircher, 2008). Even in mainstream western societies, evaluating the social and emotional costs and benefits of young people’s internet access involves a complex set of measurements and extrapolations applied to a fluid and dynamic range of behaviours. Parents make their decisions in light of their assumptions of how their children will respond to the opportunities on offer. They soon learn that, as in other areas of their children’s lives, their child’s future behaviours concerning online activity do not necessarily progress in an expected, or linear, way. (The use of italics within a quote indicates the interviewer’s prompt question):

> Are there issues in the house about Clint’s use of the internet – for example costs, sleep, family time? Generally it wouldn’t be a problem because there is a routine. I have heard of kids getting up in the middle of the night and turn[ing] their PlayStation on but our kids wouldn’t be allowed and we would hear them through the walls. The only thing would have been too much obsession with games when they were younger, not wanting to come down for meals but not so much now. They’ve grown out of that stage now … they would have done it 24/7 if they’d been allowed. (Clint’s mother)

The implication here is that Clint’s parents, possibly drawing upon conversations with their contemporaries, construct an anticipated trajectory of their child’s internet activities and then compare their actual experience with that which had been predicted. Clint’s mother’s statement indicates that she constructs online engagement as passing through a number of “stages” as her child matures. Even so, she sees a requirement for active parental intervention, as indicated in her comment about how she did not allow her children to play games (in this case using a PlayStation console with online capability) around the clock. Negotiating these boundaries and managing any associated conflict might be seen as one of the
costs of a parent allowing their child to access digital technology. Asked about the positives, however, parents often point to educational benefits:

*What do you think are the positive things about [*Bec*] using the internet? It is good for educational reasons. [*Bec*] has gone through some good topics and research through internet, and her dad spends a lot of time with her. She has to do a project on high rise buildings, so researching that and geographical research. She’ll sit and watch geographical TV. She watches the usual rubbish that teenagers watch as well, but sometimes she watches educational programs, then will research things. Some things she questions, then we’ll say – ‘look it up’. (Bec’s mother)*

Although there are clear value judgements around Bec’s different online activities (“the usual rubbish”), Bec’s mother is keen to indicate that her household uses Bec’s internet use as a means of creating valuable parent-child interaction (“her dad spends a lot of time with her [online]”) and harnesses everyday exchanges to prompt internet use as part of an integrated learning experience (“then we’ll say – ‘look it up’”). One extrapolation from these two sets of parental statements is that the costs of potential conflict around monitoring online use, and of allowing children the opportunity to consume rubbish, are balanced by the benefits of positive child-parent engagement and the development of valued skills in “research” and for “educational reasons”.

From the child’s point of view, adult agendas can be understood as much by what is not said, as about explicit statements about the costs of exposing children to internet-related risks. Asked about his internet use at school, Clint wastes no time in communicating that his priorities come first, which is to say his daily search for an interesting wallpaper image, which is not one of the school’s primary motivations for providing their students with laptop computers:

*What about during school days? I use it all the time during school because they give us MacBooks … Every day on the MacBook I go into Google to get background pictures that I like. [Did …] they give you any lessons on using it safely when they gave you the MacBook …? They just gave them to us and told us a tiny bit about them, but didn’t really tell us about safety, but the school always puts notices about things like that online and on noticeboards. I just know about safety because they ban some websites. (Clint, 14)*

Clint tacitly uses a deconstructive approach to move from an understanding of banned sites to the construction of online safety, which is indicated via the banning of some sites. His family had recently returned from a posting in the United States so Clint has had the opportunity to critically evaluate different classification regimes, as his mother explained: “There was also an issue of ‘Can I have such and such a game?’ Such and such a game was an 18 game and no you can’t have it.” She went on to explain: “He thought it was brilliant because his games over here were 15s and in [the USA] they were all 18. They need to look at the ratings here because some of the 15 games should be 18” (Clint’s mother). Interestingly, in this exchange Clint’s mother is establishing her willingness to evaluate game content in terms of her child’s relative maturity but also communicates that, while she makes these judgements, she does not necessarily impose them on her child. Given that Clint is still 14, it might not matter whether a game is classified as MA 15+ or R 18+, as his age is below that for which either game is classified. Even so, in her reference to “his games over here” Clint’s mother implies that her son is playing these games at 14, even though she believes they are better suited to adults than teenagers. Such an exchange makes visible the boundaries that parents are willing to police (hours of engagement, “24/7”) and those areas where they are prepared to cede ground, such as around classification. What is unclear from this exchange, and not explored in the interview, was whether Clint’s mother was aware of the particularly Australian debates around R 18+ computer gaming, given that until recently the highest classification permitted was MA 15+. Games which were licensed as R 18+ in other jurisdictions were sometimes licensed as MA 15+ for Australian use on condition that the game was modified to comply with the lower age limit (Attorney-General’s Department, 2010).
The Practicalities of Internet Use

It has been established that children and parents differ in terms of their perspectives about risk online. Parents are fearful of the impact of stranger danger (paedophiles), pornography and too much time spent online; children’s fears more frequently relate to identity theft, cyberbullying and spam (Green, 2010). In many ways, teens’ concerns about their internet use focus on practical issues and everyday experiences. As Bec says, when asked whether she used the internet much:

No, because I have to pay for it because I have a credit thing on my phone so I pay for the internet but I really only use it when I’m on the bus or by myself at school – I might just quickly check Facebook.

Prompted to discuss her internet activity further, Bec’s idea of “not much” is clearly a relative judgement. The implication is that Bec’s use is “not much” when compared with the period of time she would like to spend on the internet:

You [say you] are mostly into Facebook. When do you do that and how much time would you spend? If it is a school day I will wake up and before I get out of bed, and before I am awake and ready to get ready, I will probably check Facebook and Instagram, then I will get ready and go to school, then I’ll come home and check it and have my phone beside me and check it every half hour, then go on it before I go to bed … my bedtime is 9.30 and then I usually go on my phone for half an hour if I can’t sleep, but if I’m tired I’ll go to sleep. I’m not one to stay up doing stuff all night. If I don’t have something important to do that day, I’ll just sleep in if I’ve stayed up late. (Bec, 13)

It would seem that multiple episodic internet use does not count as ‘much use’ and that Bec would need to be online regularly for a protracted length of time before she saw herself as using the internet very much. Her phone’s pricing policy makes her keep tabs on the time she spends online. While Bec constructs her internet use as responsible in terms of time and money, she also reveals that she engages with the internet “every half hour” or so outside school hours. Bec’s mother, possibly anticipating that Bec would make a comment such as this, is keen to make an opportunity to talk about balance within the family activities. She says that Bec is “thirteen and a half” and

… tries to push the boundaries about staying up, but she knows that in school time there is a limit and they [Bec and her younger brother] don’t have the phones or tablets on in bed. We spend a lot of time together as a family and I am not unhappy about the amount of time they spend online. (Bec’s mother)

Without further prompting, she re-emphasises this point: “We had a family break over Christmas for two weeks, and we go camping at the weekend, so we spend a lot of time together as a family” (Bec’s mother).

During his interview Clint comments that “at the moment we don’t have internet but we use internet on our phones and on a memory stick. I have a contract on my phone and every time I top it up it gives me free internet”. Clearly, Clint’s idea about what the internet should be differs from his current experience of being online in a domestic setting. Asked whether there is anything that bothers him when he is on the internet, Clint offers a prosaic answer, paralleling Bec’s everyday concerns about cost:

It’s very slow. If you are used to a phone with a certain type of internet on it, it would be a lot slower than a satellite phone. If your internet is on a smart phone it will be satellite so it will be a lot faster. Sometime we will get proper internet in the house but we are just using that at the moment. We used to have a router but have only been in this house for a couple of months. (Clint, 14)

Clint’s mother is poised to address the quality of internet access available:
Next week we are getting the internet in. I was holding off because I was hoping to have been somewhere more permanent. Because it is a rental I didn’t want to go to all the hassle. We were hoping to buy but things have changed. (Clint’s mother)

Although they have concerns around issues of cost and speed in their contemporary internet access, both Bec and Clint locate their initiation as internet users in positive domestic and social contexts, rather than as part of an educational setting. “[To Bec] Do you remember how you learnt how to use it? Who showed you or sat beside you? Probably my Dad because he is more computer smart, he is the one that sets everything up. I don’t really remember, it just sort of happened” (Bec, 13). Clint says:

Originally we had a PS1, then my dad got a PS2 and my brother took it, then I got a PS2. Then we got PS3. … It was a family thing – me and my brother on PlayStations. People have also shown me websites – my brother showed me Tuberty. Everybody else was using Facebook so I used Twitter and Facebook as well. Other people are doing it and you just blend in. (Clint, 14)

Clint’s older brother Martin (15) and his father are credited as being primary influencers rather than his peer group, although “everybody else” is also acknowledged.

Judging Appropriate Behaviour

Parents and teens both engage in a continual conversation around what is and is not appropriate behaviour online, and what is and is not acceptable within the context of domestic internet access. This communication is visible in what is said and in the ways in which it is said, as illustrated in Clint’s mother’s discussion about the classification ratings for Clint’s games. In making such judgements, all parties are aware that these constitute statements about the self and relationships with family members and friends. People use metacommunication, the context within which language use occurs, to comment upon the situation or circumstance and share their judgements, values and preferences as to conduct. Children also adopt these metacommunicative strategies, and in doing so reassure their parents as to their trustworthiness online. Bec has been established, at 13 (the official minimum age for membership), as an active user of Facebook. She says:

A lot of people my age make statuses about grown up parties they are going to, and I don’t understand why people my age would go out drinking and smoking but people post statuses about that on Facebook and then other people will do that because they think it is cool to do that. I would never do that and I don’t understand why. I don’t understand – they have a legal age for a reason. I guess because it is illegal they think it is cool to do it. (Bec, 13)

Bec’s mother is also concerned about Facebook and what constitutes age-appropriate behaviour while being somewhat hazy around actual age limits for Facebook. Talking about Bec’s access to Facebook her mother says:

You can’t hide them from things like Facebook, and it makes them streetwise. They have friends that are not allowed to use it, but their mums pick them up from school and drop them off and they are not learning any life skills … We’ve only let them have it this past year and she had to wait for a year after I got it but I know some of them have had it for years but I don’t think it is appropriate. I think they lowered the age limit a year or so ago. But if you don’t let them be in with it … But I keep an eye on what they are saying. They have to be my friend on Facebook so I know what is going on. Unless they are sneaky and have other accounts but I hope they are not like that … I always say what happens in these walls stays in these walls – you don’t air your dirty washing out. I think for Facebook the age limit should be a bit higher. (Bec’s mother)
The comment about Facebook making teens “streetwise” indicates that Bec’s mother judges the site to be a useful locale in which Facebook can explore social boundaries around such behaviours as underage drinking and smoking without being exposed to the behaviours themselves. Bec’s statements also indicate that she uses Facebook to inform her opinions on these issues. Other than that, Bec’s mother’s fear seems to be as much around what Bec might say (airing “dirty washing”) as around material she might come into contact with. At the same time, she says both that “the age limit should be a bit higher” and that Bec has had access “this past year and she had to wait for a year”. These statements, given that Bec is thirteen and a half, indicate that Bec may well have had underage access to Facebook, whether or not her mother feels the age limit should be higher. The notion of waiting “for a year” indicates that many of Bec’s peers might have had SNS profiles at a younger age, and that Bec’s mother took this fact into account when allowing Bec’s access. Indeed, research with a representative population of Australian 9-16 year olds indicates that 29% of 9-10 year olds, and 59% of 11-12 year olds, have a SNS profile (Green, Brady, Ólafsson, Hartley & Lumby, 2011).

Like many teenagers, Clint has explored his parents’ boundaries around access to (in)appropriate content. He does not mention this in his interview, but his mother does: “He got an iPod for his birthday 2 or 3 years ago … He did go onto inappropriate sites and got the iPod taken off him so he knows what he should and shouldn’t be doing” (Clint’s mother). Asked about whether he has “any understandings or rules about your internet use that your parents would like you to follow”, Clint chooses to focus on everyday restrictions: “I think they would rather me sleep early. Sometimes if I can’t sleep I just stay up on my phone but that doesn’t help.” This contrasts somewhat with Clint’s mother’s previous comment about there being “a routine” around bed times and indicates that this is more of an issue for Clint than his mother might acknowledge.

Parental Concerns Around Online Risk

The “streetwise” statement made by Bec’s mother indicates her confidence that Facebook experience can prepare Bec for some of the challenges awaiting her in the wider world. Similarly, Clint’s mother constructs the internet as offering a locale in which her son can explore social dimensions to communication: “Everything is not black and white. They [children with a diagnosis of a communicative disorder] can be very naive and just don’t get it. They are very vulnerable. It depends on the way they have been brought up.” This reference to vulnerability relates to Clint’s diagnosis of CAPD. This condition has social consequences, as Clint explains in his interview: “I have friends that I socialise with at school – we talk on Twitter and Facebook – but I don’t really see them outside school. I’m a socially awkward person outside” (Clint, 14).

In her interview, Clint’s mother goes on to argue that “vulnerable” young people should be exposed to situations which stimulate the development of skills in evaluating different social situations: “You can see the different ones – ones that have been wrapped up and haven’t been allowed to do things or haven’t been pushed. They will stand back and do nothing for themselves. In a way you have to steer them” (Clint’s mother). Her family also used Bec’s mother’s strategy of monitoring SNS activities through being a ‘friend’ online. Clint’s mother says:

I think it is important just to keep an eye on them. Martin [Clint’s brother] is 15 and my husband is still on his Facebook page so he knows what is going on. You can sort of police it but not come down with an iron bar.

One significant concern is around whether Clint might fail to judge accurately the motivation of someone who might ‘friend’ him online. This is indicated in the next sentence of Clint’s mother’s interview: “If Clint thought somebody was his friend he would probably go and meet them, but he is only 14 and may be a bit more vulnerable than other kids his age.”

A different risk was raised by Bec’s mother before she also moved into a comment about “stranger danger”:
Our concern has always been the cyber bullying. We’ve always talked to them about bullying and how you are not to hide it but must tell us, no matter how small or how big they think it is, it is best to at least talk about it. A problem shared is a problem halved, don’t bottle it up, and don’t get into any battles on Facebook. Just get off it or block that person. There is no point getting into slanging matches. If they don’t have the [privacy] protection it is open to anybody and you don’t know who is out there, on Facebook or anything. [I also have] concerns about strangers … Are you confident she would be able to handle things if she came across predators or harassment? Yes. We’ve always brought them up like that, even [protecting them] from stranger danger. In Wales you wouldn’t let them play out like they do here. In Wales you wouldn’t let them play in the front garden. (Bec’s mother)

Bec’s mother uses this commentary to communicate two perceptions she believes to be important. First, she explains her strategy of talking things through with her children as a means of helping protect them from harm and expresses her confidence that this equips them to handle such challenges. Second, her statement conveys her belief that she has an informed understanding of, and possibly a judgement around, issues of managing stranger danger. She compares the practices she sees in Wales, United Kingdom, which was where she was brought up, with those she sees in Australia, echoing Clint’s mother’s statements around her experience of classification regimes in the USA.

Bec has internalised her mother’s primary fears for her. Asked about what “your mum’s and dad’s concerns are about you using the internet”, Bec says, “They would worry that I might be bullied, or that I would post something inappropriate”. She adds:

If things like Facebook didn’t exist I think people would get along a lot nicer because now they are cyber bullying. Someone will post something and people will bully them for that post because they think the post isn’t cool or something like that. (Bec, 13)

Conclusion

This paper reports upon a pilot study with a small sample which investigates the metacommunication that occurs when parents and their teenage children talk to each other about online activities. It addresses children’s and parents’ constructions of costs, benefits, advantages and concerns incurred by teenagers’ internet activities. In discussing these issues, different understandings are constructed and shared about the appropriate role of the internet in the life of a teenager. Such constructions draw upon a range of influences and experiences. In the examples cited here, early teens’ primary influences seem to be their parents, their siblings, their peers and what they learn from their own experience. Parents seem to compare their child’s actions with other children in the family, and with those of peer group members. They seem more aware of, and have opinions on, such matters as age limits and classification categories and also draw upon relevant experience of these issues from other areas and contexts, including time spent overseas.

Both the families considered in this paper have adopted a strategy of open communication with their children and this might reflect the particular dynamics which informed their joint choices to engage with the research project. These participants felt comfortable talking about the issues canvassed because they are already an important topic of conversation in their respective households. As Clint’s mother says:

I always think that communication is a really big thing. If you have an open communication and sit down and talk so that if there is something wrong they are going to talk to you. If you don’t have that, you are not going to get them to talk. He may not want to talk to me but he could talk to his dad. It is not just a case of come and sit down, we are going to have a chat. It doesn’t work like that. Keep communication open, if it closes it is very hard to get back on track.
This everyday parental perspective accords with findings from a range of studies that indicate parents’ engagement to be positively correlated with their children’s beneficial internet use (Australian Communications & Media Authority, 2007). In Australia, a representative sample of 400 9-16 year olds, and the parent most involved with their child’s internet use, indicates that 75% of Australian children “pay attention to parental mediation, this being above the [internationally comparative] 25 nation average (64%)” (Green et al., 2011, p. 10). While internet access is an important cultural experience for contemporary young Australians, discussions around “notions of who lets who use what, of moral judgements of the other’s activities, of the expression of needs and desires, of justifications and conflict, of separateness and mutuality” (Livingstone, 1992, p. 113) also constitute the building blocks for a shared family life.

References


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Media and Mobile Phones in a South African Rural Area

A Baseline Study

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Abstract

In South Africa, access to information remains unequal and often hampered by language barriers, poor infrastructure and endemic poverty, particularly among members of rural and peri-urban communities. The government recognises the potential of media and information and communication technology (ICT) to promote socio-economic development and social cohesion. In this paper we discuss the findings of a survey on media and ICT (particularly mobile phones) in a rural community. The area is the site of a number of interventions and research projects by a nearby university. Our study provides a baseline to measure their impact and identify future trends. Data from 300 households was collected through a set of open-ended, as well as closed, questions. Language emerged as an important factor in media consumption. Broadcast media were more common than print and people showed a preference for news, followed by entertainment. While computers were virtually non-existent, mobile phones were omnipresent and most respondents could be considered experienced users. Although the costs associated with mobile phones were key concerns, most households had access to at least one phone with advanced features such as internet connectivity. Different activities performed on mobile phones reflected different gender and generational roles. Our work indicates that further research is needed on quality and frequency of media consumption as well as a more detailed study of mobile phone use. Research along the age and gender dimensions promises to yield interesting results. A qualitative approach is best suited for such in-depth investigation.

Keywords: mass media in South Africa; rural communication; minority media; mobile phones; age and gender

Introduction

The South African media landscape is undergoing significant transformations that have implications for communication policies. Redressing the inequalities of the past is of paramount importance and recent violent confrontations between police and protesters have brought this issue into focus. Language barriers and socio-economic differences still affect access to information and meaningful participation. Given its geographical and social diversity, South Africa provides examples of trends found in developed as well as developing countries. Formulating a comprehensive strategy for its vast rural areas, where the majority of the population lives, is key to future stability and economic sustainability. Media and information and communication technology (ICT) have a key role to play.

In this paper we present and discuss the findings of a questionnaire survey on media and mobile phones in a rural area in South Africa. The area is representative of many rural African realities and has been the site of extensive ethnographic research in the past (De Wet, 1989). It has recently become the site of several
interventions and research projects by a nearby university. Part of this endeavour is to foster the development of community media and to explore the potential of ICT for the socio-economic development of the area.

The current study represents an initial step in understanding present diffusion and consumption of media as well as use of ICT (particularly mobile phones). The instrument used allows for comparison with similar data collected in other rural and peri-urban areas in South Africa. Our findings will act as a baseline to measure the impact of future projects and capture developing trends. The paper starts with a general overview of media and ICT penetration in South Africa, with a specific focus on those aspects relevant to our survey. We then describe the methodology used and discuss the findings. Our conclusions summarise the key points and provide some guidelines for future research.

Context

In this section we selectively rely on the chronological taxonomy of mass media by Ahonen (2008). Some of the mass media identified by this author (e.g. cinema) are not present in the area under consideration while others (e.g. recordings) are grouped with other media (e.g. television). Following McLuhan's distinction between “hot” and “cold” media (see McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995), we consider traditional (i.e. press and broadcast) as well as interactive (i.e. networked computers and mobile phones) media while noting the points of convergence.

The Press

According to a survey by the South African Audience Research Foundation (SAARF, 2012), approximately 50% of all South Africans over the age of 15 years read newspapers. The print media landscape includes 22 daily and 25 weekly major urban newspapers as well as 400 regional and community newspapers (SA Info, 2013). While publications targeting white middle class audiences seem to follow a stagnating trend seen in most developed countries, press targeting working class and specifically black South Africans (e.g. The Daily Sun) are rapidly increasing in circulation, consistent with trends observed in other developing countries (Franklin, 2008; see also Steenwald & Strelitz, 2010).

Publications can be categorised according to their area of circulation, language and readers. Most newspapers are in English (e.g. The Sunday Times, circulated nationally, and The Herald in the Eastern Cape Province). Some are published in Afrikaans (e.g. Beeld and Die Burger) and a few in African languages such as isiZulu (e.g. Isoxelwe). Some regional daily newspapers (e.g. The Daily Dispatch) have a weekly insert in isiXhosa. Besides language barriers, low levels of literacy and lack of disposable income hamper newspaper reading in poor rural communities. The latter in particular determines newspaper sharing among different people and the subsequent discrepancy between the number of readers and copies sold.

Bosch (2010) notes how the digital revolution challenged South African publications to formulate new strategies and open up to new audiences. A number of newspapers (e.g. Mail and Guardian) have an online presence and general as well as specialised online news portals exist (e.g. News24 and ITWeb). Online and mobile spaces hold potential for hyperlocal media organisations (see Dalvit & Kromberg, 2012). Access to the internet in marginalised communities is limited and in most cases quite expensive (Abrahams & Goldstuck, 2012). As noted by Wasserman (2010), tabloid journalism is an important phenomenon in South Africa. Magazines targeting a black readership (e.g. Drum and Bona) are widely read. Wright, Noble and Magasea (2008) note that only 20% of South Africans consider magazines and newspapers as essential, as opposed to the 77% and 72% who feel that way about radio and television respectively.
Broadcasting

The broadcast media landscape is characterised by the distinction between public, commercial and, particularly in the case of radio, community players. At a national level, radio stations such as SAFM and Mhlombo Wenene broadcast in English and isiXhosa respectively. At a provincial and local level one finds commercial radio stations, such as TrueFM and AlgoaFM, coupling the use of English with isiXhosa and Afrikaans respectively. Community radio stations are often monolingual and with limited geographical reach. Universities often have campus radio stations, which reach both students and people in neighbouring areas. The television landscape consists of three South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) channels operating all 11 official languages (in different measures), a commercial channel – E.TV – and two satellite TV operators – Multichoice and TopTV.

South African broadcast media offer a wide selection of programs ranging from soaps and talk shows to news and sport. The politicised role of the media under apartheid might explain an interest in news and political affairs (see Kivikuru, 2006). Popular culture has been an angle for research into soap operas and drama in both radio and TV (Ives, 2007; Gunner, 2000). American influence is noticeable with the presence of foreign soapies (Barns, 2003), as well as the American cultural influence on locally produced programs such as Generations (see Dolby, 2006; Barnard, 2008). Cultural adaptation efforts are mainly limited to the use of South Africa’s Indigenous languages with English subtitles (Msimang, 2008). Indigenous productions such as Muvhango and Yizo-Yizo are also fairly popular.

Convergence has implications for media consumption in marginalised areas. Armstrong and Collins (2011) note how 4.5 million low-income households will effectively determine the pace and success of digital migration. Satellite TV is becoming increasingly attractive for members of marginalised communities for practical as well as symbolic reasons (see Noble & Wright, 2013). Due to its pervasiveness, radio appears to have the potential to bring the advantages offered by new technologies to marginalised communities (see Megwa, 2007). Listening to radio on a mobile phone is becoming a popular activity among rural and peri-urban South African youth (Gunzo & Dalvit, 2012).

Computers

According to Wright et al. (2008) access to, or ownership of, a computer is considered essential by 28% of the South African population (comparable to a DVD player or access to a local cinema). According to Research on ICT in Africa (RIA, 2011), only 15% of all households had a working computer, while only five percent reported having a working internet connection. South Africa has one of the best rates of internet penetration on the continent, estimated at 10%, although Goldstuck (2013) points out government responsibilities in a decreasing world ranking. This author also notes that an emphasis on community, rather than household, access needs to be reconsidered. An earlier report by Tlabela, Roodt, Paterson and Weir-Smith (2007) highlights the differences between provinces and between urban and rural areas. In the latter, ICT penetration is often close to the African average.

The South African Government is committed to providing universal access to ICT (Oyedemi, 2009). This goal is pursued mainly through the establishment of public telecentres and school computer laboratories through which many poor South Africans access computers and the internet. Telecommunication operators are also compelled to provide services to low-income communities as part of their licensing requirements.

The distinction between physical and epistemological access to ICT is important. Goldstuck (2010a, 2010b) notes that it takes a certain period (approximately five years) from the acquisition of an internet-enabled device to actual participation online. This would mean that, despite government goals to provide universal access to broadband by 2015, meaningful participation on a large scale by those who gain access cannot be realistically expected before 2020. When conducting research in rural areas, it is important to take a dynamic approach considering previous exposure to technology. As noted by Donner and Gitau
(2009), for a growing number of South Africans such experience is gained primarily through mobile phones.

**Mobile Phones**

As the most pervasive ICT among all sectors of society, mobile phones have a key role to play in promoting access and participation. In South Africa, as in other parts of the developing world, people often have access to a phone they do not own (James, 2011). Kreutzer (2009) notes the high levels of mobile penetration among urban youth and the similarity between owners and those who access shared mobile phones. This author also highlights a high daily internet use via a mobile phone (68%), the popularity of instant messaging (e.g. Mxit) and a growing use of creative multimedia features such as taking pictures and videos. Although traditional media were still preferred, a substantial percentage (28%) consumed media online.

Alba (2008) notes the specific challenges of mobile penetration in rural areas. In Sub-Saharan Africa, network coverage seems to be an important factor (Buys, Dasgupta, Thomas & Wheeler, 2009). For poor communities, tariffs are also something to consider in the choice of a mobile network operator (Hodge, 2005). More than 90% opt for a prepaid solution because not everybody has a stable salary and a bank account as required for contracts. Relatively high interconnection charges make it worthwhile for people to choose the same operator as their friends and family or to swap SIM cards according to the person called (Esselaar & Weeks, 2008; see also Chepken, Blake & Marsden, 2013). It should also be noted that people who use more than one SIM card might be considered as multiple users in big data research (see boyd & Crawford, 2011). In South Africa, the main mobile operators are MTN and Vodacom with smaller competitors, Cell C, 8ta and Virgin Mobile, controlling a smaller portion of the market.

Our study builds on previous quantitative work on media, ICT and mobile use in marginalised areas in South Africa. In particular, we considered surveys in peri-urban and rural areas with school-going youth (Kreutzer, 2009; Gunzo & Dalvit, 2012) and in rural households (Pade-Khene, Palmer & Kavhai, 2010; Cristoferi & Dalvit, 2013). While two of the surveys focused specifically on the behaviour of young adopters, little is known about intergenerational trends and differences. Differences in behaviour and activities between genders are also rarely captured in household surveys. We identified four clusters of activities commonly performed on mobile phones: communication (voice and SMS); multimedia (playing music, taking and viewing pictures and short videos); networked (web browsing, email and social networking); and money-related activities (airtime transfer and mobile banking).

**Methodology**

In this section we briefly outline the methodological aspects of our study. Household survey using an orally-administered questionnaire is an established practice in research on ICT penetration in rural areas (see Pade-Khene et al., 2010). We limit ourselves to a brief overview of the research site and data collection process. Some reflections on methodological aspects are provided in the findings section and in the conclusions.

**Site**

Keiskammahoek is a small rural town in the Amathole district in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The town is surrounded by a number of villages and peri-urban settlements. The area presents a combination of flat and mountainous landscape. The latter in particular has implications for mobile network coverage as well as reception of TV and radio signals. The vast majority of the population is black and isiXhosa speaking with various levels of proficiency in English as a second or third language.
The economy of Keiskammahoek relies mainly on government grants, remittances and subsistence farming. The population has been steadily declining because of internal migration towards urban centres. Many villages are still without basic services such as water and sanitation. However, in recent years, the area has become a centre of attention by an American donor and various departments at a nearby university. The donor installed modern ICT infrastructure in a local school, rendering it ideal for ICT training and community access. Multidisciplinary research is ongoing. The site is often visited by researchers and is becoming increasingly well documented.

Data Collection

The data presented in this paper was collected in the Keiskammahoek area over a period of a few weeks in late 2012. The ten-item questionnaire comprised mostly open-ended questions, which explains the amount of data generated. The questionnaire was administered orally by local fieldworkers to overcome language barriers, accommodate illiterate respondents and ensure consistency. The topics of the questionnaire focused on media consumption and mobile phone use. Most questions related to the respondents’ household. A few questions related to mobile phones were directed personally to the respondent or referred to individual household members. This allowed for consideration of some demographic variables.

Out of the 500 questionnaires distributed, 300 were completed properly and adequately, resulting in a response rate of 60%—an exceptionally high figure considering that the survey was based in a rural area. The administration of questionnaires was done in person by fieldworkers who are members of the community, which probably contributed to the positive response rate. This survey piggy-backed on a more comprehensive household survey. Therefore, as soon as the data of the larger survey is available, correlations can be made between household background variables and the data presented here. For the time being, this paper provides a brief overview of the aggregate data.

Data was quantitatively analysed and presented through descriptive statistics. A summary of the key findings was presented to a Keiskammahoek delegation in early 2013. This enabled us to complement and provide tentative explanations for some of the data. The meeting also provided a solid foundation for future research in the area. We collaboratively discussed practical interventions involving the development of local media and exploring the potential of ICT and mobile phones.

Findings

In this section we present the findings of our survey. Data relating to newspapers, radio, TV and computers are presented first. The discussion of mobile phone penetration, network and use follow, with particular attention to intergenerational and gender differences.

Newspapers

Newspaper circulation in the community is substantial, although lower than the estimated national average. The survey indicates that people in 28% of the households regularly read newspapers. Although daily newspapers are the most read, most respondents reported reading them only on a weekly basis. Only people in three percent of the households read newspapers daily, 18% at least weekly and seven percent at least monthly.

A balance between national and regional exists among daily as well as weekly publications. People in 23% of the households surveyed read the Daily Dispatch, a regional newspaper with a weekly insert in isiXhosa, the most widely spoken African language. The high figure for weekly reading noted above might be due to people with low English proficiency reading only the insert in their mother tongue. An additional 10% read the Daily Sun, a national daily specifically targeting a black readership. People in three percent of the households read The Herald and The Sunday Times, regional and provincial weekly
publications respectively. Magazines were not included in the present study. These findings point to an interest in print material that is culturally and linguistically relevant for people in rural areas. At present such offering is surprisingly limited for a country where the vast majority has an African language as their mother tongue. Recent announcements by independent newspapers claim an intention to revive a comparatively long tradition of publications in African languages.

Radio

Radio is widely available reflecting figures consistent with national averages. People in the majority of households (78%) own a radio and 80% receive radio signals. A further 72% of those who do not own a radio claim to have access to one.

People in most households (79%) listen to the isiXhosa Umhlobwenene, a national radio station. People in only seven percent of the households listen to TrueFM and two percent to Forte. These are regional radio stations broadcasting in both English and isiXhosa. English-only radios like SFM and SAFM are less popular, with only people in one percent of households surveyed who listen to each radio station.

News and talk shows seem to be the most popular type of program. In 63% of the households people listen to ‘news/café’. Religious programs, short stories and music programs are each followed in 45% of the households. As seen below, an interest in news and current affairs is present across media.

TV

Television seems to be as popular as radio. People in the majority of the households (79%) own a TV and 83% receive TV signals. A further 70% of those who do not own a TV claim to have access to one. People in most of the households (57%) own a DVD/VCR player and 62% of those who do not own one at least have access to one.

As is the case with radio, news is the most popular type of program. Among TV programs, news on SABC and ETV prove the most watched (78% and 76% respectively), followed closely by Generations (73%), an American-style soap opera where almost all South African languages are used (with English subtitles). The popularity of other soapsies ranges from 32% (Rhythm City) and 19% (ETV Resung) with YizoYizo, Muvhango and Scandal in the middle at 24-26% each. People in 24% of the households watch sport programs. They also watch talk shows like Khumbulekhaya (24%) and Dr Phil (13%).

In the case of the programs mentioned above, broadcast time might influence the response as much as the age and gender of respondents. One should note that, unlike radio, respondents mentioned specific programs. These emerged from responses to open-ended questions about their preferences and not pre-set lists of options. For both TV and radio, the interest in news over entertainment contrasts with trends in developed countries. An interest in content in African languages is confirmed across all traditional media.

Computers

Computer penetration in the area is in line with the average for Africa as a whole but lower than the national average for South Africa. This is in line with the rural and economically marginalised character of the area. Only four percent of households claim to have a computer. However, 67% have access to a computer somewhere else. This seems to be a high figure and it would be interesting to find out where members of the Keiskammahoek community access computers outside their home (e.g. in schools, internet cafes etc.).

The types of activities people are reportedly able to perform on a computer are predominantly related to productivity rather than entertainment. This might suggest a use of computers restricted to the school or
work environment. A relatively high portion of respondents (11%) claimed that somebody in their household used computers to search for information and eight percent to type documents, download files or exchange e-mails. To a lesser extent, computers are also used for other activities such as social networking (1%), playing games (1%) or listening to music (1%). (It should be noted that 10% of the respondents did not answer these questions, making the data less accurate than those relative to other media.)

**Mobile Penetration**

Mobile phones are by far the most common media. The majority of households (91%) have mobile phones and network coverage. Seventy-six percent of those who do not own a mobile phone have access to one. These figures are consistent with findings from similar surveys and the reported data for mobile phone use, which will be discussed below. One can state that, in the area under consideration, mobile phones are either owned or accessible by almost everybody. This is consistent with the findings of research in comparable areas (Gunzo & Dalvit, 2012).

Most people in the area seem to have had substantial experience with mobile phones. This is confirmed by the figures for the number of mobile phones owned in the past as well as number of years the respondent has owned a mobile phone. On average, each respondent has owned 2.8 mobile phones. Those who have owned three or more mobile phones make up a fair portion of the sample (42%), while only five percent claim that they have never owned a mobile phone. Half of the respondents have owned a mobile phone for four or more years and an additional 30% have owned a mobile phone for two or three years. Only a minority (less than 3%) acquired their first mobile phone in the last year. Most mobile phones currently being used appear to have been acquired in the last two years. Approximately 30% of the respondents acquired their current mobile phone in the last year and an additional 30% in the last one to two years. Only 16% have had their current mobile phone for four or more years. Although this does not tell us about the available features, it is reasonable to assume that recent devices would generally have more advanced features. The relationship between experience of the user, age (and features) of the mobile phone and actual use is worth exploring in more depth.

**Network**

Figures for mobile network providers are clearly in favour of one cellular operator – MTN – which is used by the vast majority of the respondents (76%). This would make Keiskammahoek an interesting site for research on the effect of discounted data or even zero rating on, for example, online media consumption. Approximately 18% use Vodacom and 13% use Cell C, while only one percent reported using 8ta – a recently launched mobile branch of the national landline operator, Telkom. The sum of the figures for all operators (108%) suggests that at least eight percent of the respondents might use more than one SIM card. This is worth researching further as it poses interesting questions, for instance, on the impact of interconnection charges on universal access in marginalised communities. As noted above, single users of multiple SIM cards pose a challenge for big data (and generally speaking data-driven) research in these communities.

The choice of operator reflects the poor and rural character of the area. Sixty-seven percent of respondents cite the cost of calls as the most common factor influencing the choice of network provider. A small difference in cost can be crucial, considering that the average amount of money spent on mobile phones is approximately ZAR160 (AUS17) per month and that seven percent of the respondents claim they spend nothing on mobile phones or did not respond. Network coverage influenced the choice of operator for 58%. Other reasons, such as quality of service and matching the network used by family and friends, were mentioned by approximately 50% of the respondents. A more nuanced survey of network coverage and other opportunities for connectivity might yield interesting results. Cost and coverage might significantly
affect the balance between mobile data and other wireless technologies (VSAT, WIMAX etc.) in future interventions.

Mobile Phone Activities

Respondents were asked to categorise mobile phone use by the members of their household. A total of 698 members were categorised as either ‘brother’ (33%), ‘sister’ (37%), ‘father’ (9%), ‘mother’ (18%), ‘grandfather’ (5%) or ‘grandmother’ (3%). These percentages are roughly equivalent to the proportions of the respondents themselves. It should be noted that the defining labels, while befitting the conventions of Xhosa culture, are biased by the relationship between the household member and the respondent. Field workers were instructed to capture the member's position in the household, not his or her relation to the respondent. However, the classification as ‘brother’ might refer to people in a wide age range, depending on the age of the respondent. It should also be noted that the preponderance of the ‘siblings’ cohort might affect the interpretation of the data.

The sample can be divided in half between those who performed basic, as opposed to advanced, activities on a mobile phone. Approximately 40% use a phone for communication only and an additional 10% for communication and money-related activities (which include mobile banking but also SMS notifications and airtime transfer). Within the remaining half is the second most popular combination – that is, communication, multimedia (e.g. taking/viewing/sharing photographs, playing music) and network (e.g. email, web browsing, instant messaging and social networking) activities (27% perform all three types of activities on a mobile phone). Less than 18% of respondents practice activities in all categories. These figures are consistent with reported uses of mobile phones by different members in each household.

Communication was by far the most common use for mobile phones, followed by multimedia, network and money-related activities. A phone was used for communication by 98% of the sample and by at least one person in 95% of the households. The difference in figures between individual and household use is particularly interesting for the other three sets of activities. If we consider individual household members, only 51% use a phone for multimedia and 40% for network-related activities. However, the figures for households where at least one person performed these types of activities are 20% higher (70% and 60% respectively). A similar finding is present when money-related uses of mobile phones are concerned (22% of individuals and 27% of households). In view of the discussion of mobile phone sharing above, it is worth noting that the reach of phones with relatively advanced features through kinship might be substantially higher than what is revealed by surveys targeting individuals.

Gender and Cohort

The younger cohort (siblings – i.e. brothers and sisters) appears to use phones differently from the older ones. While figures were similar for communication and money-related uses, 60% of the siblings use a phone for multimedia but only 30-35% of parents and grandparents do so. The difference is even greater for network-related uses, with 50% of siblings engaging, as opposed to less than 15% of parents and grandparents. The categorisation in cohorts is probably too crude to allow for meaningful analysis. However, we can conclude that younger people generally use mobile phones for more advanced activities. It would be interesting to explore the relationship between age and phone use in more detail.

The main difference between genders concerns money-related activities. Mothers and sisters generally use a phone to transfer money more frequently than their male counterparts. In a follow up meeting with members of the community, this was explained by the fact that women typically receive child support or government grants. One should also consider that a man of working age is likely to migrate to the city to find a job and only return to Keiskammahoek if sick or unemployed. For the grandparents’ cohort, men generally use a phone for money-related activities more than women. This can be explained if we consider that older men traditionally receive support (including airtime transfers) from younger relatives they
supported as children. More research into the relationship between mobile phones and remittances might yield interesting results in terms of gender differences.

In terms of use of relatively advanced features, it is worth considering the combination of cohort and gender. Figures for siblings of different genders are comparable, whereas mothers are twice as likely as fathers to use their phone for multimedia and network-related activities. One could speculate that women with children have access to a small disposable income, which is used to buy a slightly better phone. However, this interpretation would require a more meaningful sample and/or rigorous qualitative analysis.

Conclusions

In terms of media consumption, the interest of the Keiskammahoek community seems to go towards news followed closely by entertainment. Broadcast media are prominent while print media is less so. There is definitely scope for growth in new media, particularly among young adopters and women. Language seems to influence the preferred publication, station, channel and program. This is important to consider for policymakers and implementers as well as market players interested in multilingual media and content in African languages.

Further research is needed in areas such as quality and frequency of access to various types of content (particularly print), patterns of expenditure for media consumption and availability of print, broadcast signals and network. In terms of mobile phone use, a more nuanced survey of activities is required, capturing social media behavior across different platforms as well as browsing of news and multimedia material. A study of new media across age and gender promises to yield interesting results. Media and ICT sharing is a recurring theme and is definitely worthy of further study.

References


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Blockbusters, Franchises and the Televisionisation of Cinema

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Abstract
This paper explores commercial performance of movie blockbusters at the Australian box office since the 1980s (the Multiplex Era) and draws comparisons with the performance of big movies before that time. It finds that the scale of the theatrical release of films rose through the era, but the share of the box office earned by the very biggest films fell. Although there are now more big films at the Australian box office, the very biggest individual films of the Multiplex Era are generally smaller in cinemas than those of the pre-Multiplex Era. This does not necessarily mean that less people get to see particular blockbusters overall: there are now many more ways to see movies outside cinemas that did not exist before the 1980s, including pay TV, DVD and online. Nor does it mean that less people get to experience the story-worlds of the biggest movies, even in cinemas, because so many of the highest-grossing movies now are parts of franchises, or series of films. Unlike our finding for individual movies, our analysis concludes that, as a group, the biggest franchises of the Multiplex Era, especially those beginning in the late 20th and early 21st century, have outperformed their predecessors. We interpret these findings in two ways. First, they clearly show the distribution strategy for blockbusters in the Multiplex Era, involving bigger releases and more concentrated box office earnings in a shorter theatrical window. Second, the findings show a compressed cycle of cultural consumption in the cinema that has helped motivate a significant trend in the telling of a good deal of its most popular stories.

Keywords: cinema; television; film

Introduction
This paper explores the concept of movie blockbusters and their commercial performance at the Australian box office since the 1980s – the ‘Multiplex Era’ – and, to the extent that available data allows, draws comparisons with the performance of big movies before that time. The research is part of a larger Australian Research Council Linkage project supported by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Screen Australia. Running from 2010 to 2013, Spreading Fictions is producing a series of publications analysing audiovisual fiction distribution in Australia. The first report, published in April 2012, explored online video, a sector where the services offered, the behaviour of users and the forms of measurement are changing rapidly and profoundly (Curtis, Given & McCutcheon, 2012). This paper and the full report it draws from (Given, Curtis & McCutcheon, 2013) focus on cinema, where the basic user experience and the methods for measuring it have been relatively stable for a long time. This has enabled us to do a much longer-range analysis.
The paper begins by explaining briefly why blockbusters matter economically to cinemas. It then analyses the scale of release and box office performance of the highest-grossing individual movies at the Australian box office in the Multiplex Era (since the mid-1980s) and compares them with the highest grossing movies before the 1980s. The paper then explores the concept of franchises and examines the commercial performance of the highest grossing ones, including their dominance of the top-grossing titles in the 2000s, before drawing some conclusions.

Why Blockbusters Matter to Cinemas

The term ‘blockbuster’ is used in entertainment marketing and popular culture for the very successful titles that earn a large share of total revenue. It is relevant to all entertainment markets: in separate recent research, we found that the top 20% of movie, DVD and book titles in Australia in 2011 earned 83%, 91% and 93% respectively of total revenue in each of those markets (McCutcheon & Given, 2013). ‘Blockbusters’, however, are especially discussed in movies and live theatre shows. Writing in the late 1990s, Vogel (1998) described the ‘virtual dichotomisation’ of the theatrical (movie) market into “a relative handful of ‘hits’ and a mass of also-rans”: He said that in several recent box office peak seasons, “four out of perhaps a dozen major releases have generated as much as 80 per cent of total revenues”. He called these “‘must-see’ media-event films” (Vogel, 1998, p. 53). In his most recent edition of Entertainment Industry Economics, Vogel (2011) noted that “the relative importance to revenues and profits of hit products and services is diminished as consumers are now readily able to discover and explore many more niches of interest, some of them so small that they hadn’t before been known even to exist” (p. 49, original emphasis), but argued that “the idea that more profit can collectively be generated from niche than from blockbuster hit markets has not been fully accepted” (p. 50, original emphasis).

Blockbusters are especially important for cinemas because they are a relatively high-cost form of exhibition. The distribution of all audiovisual media is constrained to some extent by the cost of storage and display or exhibition. Physical media (DVDs, books) are constrained by the cost of shelf-space and even digital media are constrained by the cost of server space. Cinema and live theatre are constrained by the large overhead and operational costs of maintaining physical spaces in popular precincts. Blockbusters are attractive because they fill these spaces for extended periods of time, achieving audience momentum through word-of-mouth, allowing the fixed costs of producing the movie or setting up the show, as well as the marketing costs, to be amortised across a longer run and higher revenue base. The markets that were once called ‘ancillary’ to cinemas (television, home entertainment – video and then DVD, downloading and streaming) have lower distribution and storage costs than cinema, so are less constrained in the range of titles they can offer. As these markets have expanded, the titles available in cinemas have represented an ever-decreasing portion of those available across all markets. The future of cinema is crucially tied to the ability of exhibitors and distributors to draw audiences to see the same titles at the same time. They need not all be ‘blockbusters’, but if audiences liberated from the constraints of limited choice do not often want to see the same films or alternative content, the economic fate of cinemas is perilous.

The Durability of the Blockbuster

To test the durability of the old concept of the theatrical blockbuster, we explored the performance of the biggest films in Australia over a long period. Table 1 – Top 5 films in 5 year periods – sets out the top five grossing films in each of five-year periods between 1986 and 2010 (see References: Data for an explanation of the inflation adjustment). Several observations can be made. First, three films stand out even in this elite box office company, one in each decade: the first Crocodile Dundee in the 1980s, James Cameron’s Titanic in the 1990s and Avatar in the 2000s. Break-out successes like this are hard to predict but they occur regularly enough that they cannot simply be treated as anomalies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Primary country of origin</th>
<th>Year of release</th>
<th>Distributor</th>
<th>Box office $m [1]</th>
<th>Box office 2012$m [2]</th>
<th>Admissions million [3]</th>
<th>Opening day prints, number</th>
<th>Opening day prints, % of total screens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1986-1990</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crocodile Dundee</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Hoyts</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>110.4</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crocodile Dundee 2</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Hoyts</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferris Woman</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>BVI/Disney</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatal Attraction</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>UIP</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>8.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ghost</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>UIP</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>10.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991-1995</td>
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<tr>
<td>Babe</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>UIP</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jurassic Park</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>UIP</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forrest Gump</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>UIP</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>16.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Lion King</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>BVI/Disney</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Doubtfire</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Fox</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>12.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996-2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Fox</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence Day</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Fox</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladiator</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>UIP</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sixth Sense</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>BVI/Disney</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>17.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001-2005</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Fellowship of the Ring</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Roadshow</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrek 2</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>UIP</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Return of the King</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Roadshow</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Two Towers</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Roadshow</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>WB</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2010</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avatar</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Fox</td>
<td>115.6</td>
<td>121.7</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>29.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dark Knight</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>WB</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>BVI/Disney</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toy Story 3</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>BVI/Disney</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry Potter and Deathly Hallows: Pt.1</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>WB</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Top 5 films in five-year periods, Australia, 1986-2010
Source: Analysis of Motion Picture Distributor’s Association of Australia (MPDAA) data.

[3] Admission figures are not available directly. Estimates have been made by dividing the gross box office per film by the average ticket price for the release period(s).
Second, although most of the biggest films of each period came from the United States, and there is no Australian film on the list since *Babe* in 1995, classifying the national origins of many is complicated. Cinema in the Online Age is not wholly made in America, although a good deal of its biggest blockbusters continue to be coordinated and financed there (Miller, Govil, McMurria, Maxwell & Wang, 2005). Principal photography and a lot of the computer-generated imagery (CGI) for *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy were done in New Zealand. The *Harry Potter* films were UK-US co-productions. Although not making the top 5, the second and third *Star Wars* prequels, *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (in 2000) and *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (in 2003), were primarily shot at Fox Studios in Sydney.

Third, the scale of the release of films rose dramatically through the era, measured by the number of prints available on opening day. The first *Crocodile Dundee* film, around the start of the suburban Multiplex Era, opened on 54 prints. The sequel two years later had twice that many. Two decades on, *Avatar* and the last *Harry Potter* film were released with around ten times the number of opening day prints of the first *Crocodile Dundee*. This means that of the nearly 700 cinema screens in Australia when *Crocodile Dundee* was released, around one in twelve had a print of the big film on opening. Of the nearly 2,000 screens when the last *Harry Potter* film was released, around one in three had a print.

This clearly shows the distribution strategy of the Multiplex Era – a much larger number of screens and prints, enabling many more screening sessions of big titles, concentrating the advertising expenditure and box office earnings in a shorter theatrical window.

Paradoxically, although the Multiplex Era has been all about big films earning big box office fast, the share of the box office earned by the very biggest films – the top 5 in each year – has fallen sharply since the 1980s (Figure 1). This is not because a substantial ‘long tail’ has emerged in the films receiving commercial release in Australian cinemas (see McCutcheon & Given, 2013), nor because the share earned by the top 5 has fallen from the high peaks of the two *Crocodile Dundee* movies at the start of the Multiplex Era, extraordinary though they were. (The box office gross earned by the first movie is still twice the inflation-adjusted gross of the next biggest Australian films of all time, *Babe* and *The Man from Snowy River*.)

The share of the box office earned by the very biggest films – the top 5 in each year – fell during the Multiplex Era because that era is also the age of home video and later DVD and online distribution, where the life of movies in cinemas is deliberately curtailed. Films do not stay in theatrical release for as long as
there is money to be made there – even where box office earnings exceed the high cost of keeping the film running. Distributors move them through cinemas, on into these ancillary markets, making way for new first release titles at the box office. The very biggest movies still earn huge box office grosses but, as a group, they generally do not stay long enough in cinemas to perform quite the way they once did. Vogel (2011) finds that the major Hollywood studios earned just over 20% of their film revenues from theatrical release in 2007, down from 53% in 1980 and 100% in 1948. Video/DVD grew from 24% to 42% between 1980 and 2007 (Vogel, 2011).

South Pacific played for 179 weeks at the Hoyts Mayfair in Sydney after opening on Boxing Day in 1958; The Sound of Music, opening in 1965, played 140 weeks at the Liberty; Crocodile Dundee ran for 74 weeks at Hoyts George Street in 1986-87 (see References: Newspaper and Magazine articles, various dates). The only Australian cinema where the biggest movie since the 1980s, Avatar, lasted longer than 33 weeks was the IMAX venue in Sydney. It ran there for just under a year but had earned 86% of its final gross by Week 20, according to Rentrak. At the Melbourne theatre where Avatar had its longest non-IMAX run, 97% of the final gross was earned by Week 20 (Rentrak, 2013). (Notable exceptions include As It Is In Heaven, which played for around two years at the Cremorne Haydn Orpheum in Sydney from 2006 to 2008, and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, which played for more than a year at Melbourne’s Nova in 2004-2005. In each case, the cinema kept screening the movie long after it was available on DVD.)

Shorter theatrical runs have different impacts on the different parts of the cinema industry. Cinema exhibitors have everything riding on theatrical performance; distributors and producers can be more agnostic about which release windows deliver them their returns, although they need to garner bigger audiences in ‘ancillary’ markets to generate the same average returns from each viewer (see Table 3.6 – Approximate cost of movie viewing per person-hour, 2010 – in Vogel, 2011, p. 96).

To investigate the differences between the biggest films of the Multiplex Era and those of the decades before it, we analysed the ‘Top 50 grossing films, 1984 to June 2012’ and a ‘Selection of 50 high-grossing films, 1939 to 1983’ – the Motion Picture Distributor’s Association of Australia (MPDAA) does not have complete data on all films from the earlier decades, including data on less than three per cent of all films released between 1940 and 1972. Table 2 shows the top 10 from the two eras (for the full lists, see Given et al., 2013, pp. 61-62).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selection of top grossing films 1939-1983</th>
<th>Top grossing films 1984-June 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Box office (2012$m) [1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gone with the Wind (1940)</td>
<td>[2] 444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sound of Music (1965)</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star Wars (1977)</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Fair Lady (1964)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grease (1978)</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Poppins (1964)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 – The top 10 blockbusters

[1] Box office for titles released before 1983 has been estimated from distributors’ film rentals (see Given et al., 2013, p. 60).

Comparing these two lists, we see that the very biggest individual films were generally bigger in cinemas before the Multiplex Era:

- The biggest film, Gone with the Wind, took more than three times the inflation-adjusted box office of the biggest Multiplex Era movie, Avatar. Even using the most conservative assumptions explained in the full report (Given et al., 2013), Gone with the Wind still earned more than twice Avatar and more than three times Titanic.
- In 2012 dollars, eight pre-multiplex movies (that we know of) took more than $70 million (compared with three Multiplex Era movies) and 13 took more than $60 million (compared with six Multiplex Era movies).
- Number 20 of the selected pre-multiplex movies (A Clockwork Orange) took $53 million; number 20 of the Multiplex Era movies (Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest) took $44 million.

But below the very biggest films, the Multiplex Era movies grossed more per title in cinemas – although in drawing this conclusion, we must stress the limited coverage of films before the 1980s and especially before the 1970s:

- Below number 25 on the two lists (Raiders of the Lost Ark, Gladiator), the box office for Multiplex Era movies starts getting bigger.
- By number 50, Fatal Attraction at $37 million (2012$m) earned around 15% more than the pre-multiplex Oliver ($32 million).

We conclude that, although there are now more big films, the very biggest individual films of the Multiplex Era are generally smaller in cinemas than those of the pre-Multiplex Era. That does not necessarily mean that less people see them overall, because there are now many more ways to see movies outside cinemas, but it is potentially very important for the cinema exhibition industry.

Franchise Films

The larger research project that this report forms part of, Spreading Fictions: Distributing Stories in the Online Age, asks a central question: How do Australians get their audiovisual stories and how might they get them in the future? Even if the very biggest individual films of the Multiplex Era are generally smaller in cinemas than those of the pre-Multiplex Era, it might not mean that the ‘story worlds’ of the multiplex and online eras are smaller, because so many of the biggest films are parts of film series or ‘franchises’: Harry Potter, Star Wars, Shrek and The Lord of the Rings.

The concept of the series or franchise is widely used, although definitions of it vary. Arguing that the term franchise is used ‘rather loosely’, Kristin Thompson (2007) says:

> Essentially it means a movie that spawns additional revenue streams beyond what it earns from its various forms of distribution, primarily theatrical, video and television. These streams may come from sequels and series or from the production company licensing other firms to make ancillary products: action figures, video games, coffee mugs, T-shirts, and the hundreds of other items that licensees conceive of. In the ideal franchise, they come from both. (p. 4)

Karen Krizanovich (2010) emphasises the serial nature of film franchises:

> As a word originally applied to fashion, fast food chains and sports teams, franchise applies to a series of films based on the same Underlying Material, produced in chronological story order or with a reference to that order; to events or characters in the previous instalment(s). A
A franchise can include remakes, prequels and sequels, as well as other terms (trilogy, series, episodes, etc.).

Linden Dalecki (2008) too stresses the sequel element:

In Hollywood parlance a franchise film is any film title that is itself a sequel, or a title that has one or more sequels that follow from it – obviously, sequels are at the core of that which constitutes a film franchise.

To explore the franchise concept, we calculated and inflation-adjusted the combined grosses for the most successful film series or franchises at the Australian box office. For this analysis, we defined a franchise as:

A series of films produced from the same underlying material by the same or a related production entity and/or under licence from the holder of rights in the underlying material. Underlying material means narrative, characters and/or milieu.

As well as series that tell a continuous narrative, like the Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and Star Wars movies, this definition includes remakes and “reboots” (Krizanovich, 2010, p. 10) undertaken by the same or a related production entity, and films that are narratively discrete but based around a single character or group of characters (e.g. James Bond, Batman, Crocodile Dundee). It does not include groups of films that originate in related underlying material (e.g. movies of Shakespeare’s plays or Jane Austen’s novels, or films made by Merchant Ivory).

The complexity of the definition highlights the fact that the idea behind franchises is not new. Kristin Thompson likens the creative borrowing and repetition they involve to the ‘air with variations’ genre in classical music, the exquisite but formulaic reliefs carved on the walls of Egyptian tombs and the multiple versions of compositions painted by assistants in the studios of Rubens and Rembrandt (Thompson, 2007). Motion picture producers have long understood the benefits of building brands that identify and familiarise ‘new’ products and shape their reception. Walt Disney’s animated features of Felix the Cat and Mickey Mouse in the 1920s and 1930s were a kind of franchise, regularly produced, released and re-released complete with matching merchandise. Studios with proud names like Pathé, MGM, Twentieth Century Fox and Warner Brothers or, much later, Pixar, were themselves franchises. They signed stars – another kind of franchise – to multi-picture contracts. Directors from Renoir, Ray and Kurosawa to Woody Allen and Jane Campion created an on-going identity and demand for their new work that outlasted the golden age of studio brands. By drawing on material made familiar in other media – books (Gone with the Wind), musicals (South Pacific), plays (My Fair Lady) or real life (Titanic) – even one-off films could be a kind of franchise.

Early Australian film series included ‘The Hayseeds’ and ‘Dad and Dave’ movies. Six silent and one sound Hayseeds films were made between 1917 and 1933, drawing on Steele Rudd’s stories and their earlier stage adaptations, and another series of books about a rural family, ‘The Waybacks’ (Byrnes, n.d.). Rudd’s characters, Dad and Dave, appeared in a silent movie in 1920, four Cinesound comedies produced between 1932 and 1940, a television series – Snake Gully With Dad ‘n’ Dave – produced by ATN7 Sydney in 1972, and a feature film starring Leo McKern and Dame Joan Sutherland in 1995 (Australian Screen, n.d.). The classic bushranger novel, Robbery under Arms, was made into a movie four times (1907, 1911, 1920, 1957) before a television series and another feature film were made in 1985. A silent movie version of The Man from Snowy River was made in 1920 and a television series in the 1990s, as well as the blockbuster movie and sequel in the 1980s. Films sometimes feed subsequent adaptation, like the musicals Priscilla, Queen of the Desert and Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

But while the concept of franchises, sequels and serials is old, two things seem distinctive about the film franchises of the 21st century: first, the scale of their commercial success; and second, the decision to produce them as franchises or packages of films, rather than one-by-one.
Commercial Performance of Franchises

Table 3 – Top grossing film franchises, 1961 to June 2012, Australia – shows that, of the top 30 grossing franchises in Australia across the five decades for which the MPDAA holds box office data (using inflation-adjusted data), 11 only started in the 2000s including three of the top five – *Harry Potter*, *Streex* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Six started in each of the 1990s and 1970s, five in the 1980s and two in the 1960s. The king of franchises, *James Bond*, has grossed nearly 40% more than *Harry Potter*, but it has taken three times as many films to do it. Ranking the franchises by their average box office gross per film, half of the top 10 are series that started in 1999 (*The Matrix*) or later. Of the $3.4 billion (at 2012 prices) earned by the top 20 franchises, more than half has been earned in the 2000s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year of first release</th>
<th>No. of films</th>
<th>Box office average per film 2012$m</th>
<th>Rank by box office average per film</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>James Bond</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>24[1]</td>
<td>513.6</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Harry Potter</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>370.1</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Star Wars</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>338.9</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>:Sheen</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>188.1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lord of the Rings</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>3[2]</td>
<td>182.8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Crocodile Dundee</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>171.0</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Batman</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>158.7</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Pirates of the Caribbean</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>141.7</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Indiana Jones</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>139.2</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Marvel Cinematic Universe[3]</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>137.3</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Twilight</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>128.1</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>115.8</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Pink Panther</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>114.9</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Transformers</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>112.9</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Rocky</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>107.1</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>American Pie</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>106.6</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Superman</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>105.3</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Matrix</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Jurassic Park</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>98.6</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Spider-Man</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>Toy Story</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Meet the Parents</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>X-Men</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>90.2</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Mission Impossible</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>84.9</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Fast and the Furious</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>84.6</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Star Trek</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Grease</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Men In Black</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>74.4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Terminator</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>72.4</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>American Pie</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 – Top grossing film franchises, 1961 to June 2012, Australia  
Source: Analysis of MPDAA data.

Facts released to 30 June 2012. Box office earned to 12 July 2012. Includes all versions of a film, for example 3D versions, re-releases. A re-release is not counted as a separate version.


[2] The extended version of *The Two Towers* is not counted as a separate version. The 1978 version of *The Lord of the Rings* is not included as box office is not available.

[3] The ‘Marvel film franchise’ is a super franchise made up of several franchises (Iron Man, Hulk, Thor and Captain America) plus The Avengers which combines the characters from these four films into one movie. Total Australian gross for The Avengers, Iron Man 1 and 2, Hulk, Thor and Captain America is 2012$137.3m (as at June 2012).
This is especially so if one adds to the movies formally categorised as sequels those based on true stories, which brought a kind of ‘brand awareness’ even when they arrived in cinemas as ‘originals’ – *Gallipoli* and *Chariots of Fire* in 1981, *Moulin Rouge* and *Pearl Harbour* in 2001.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Raiders of the Lost Ark</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>Dances with Wolves</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Fellowship of the Ring</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gallipoli</strong></td>
<td><strong>Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves</strong></td>
<td><strong>Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>Transformers: Dark Of The Moon</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mad Max 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Terminator 2: Judgment Day</strong></td>
<td><strong>Shrek</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>The Hangover Part II</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>For Your Eyes Only [James Bond]</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Silence of the Lambs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Moulin Rouge</strong></td>
<td><strong>Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1, The</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Arthur</strong></td>
<td><strong>Kindergarten Cop</strong></td>
<td><strong>Monsters Inc.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pirates of the Caribbean: on Stranger Tides</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chariots of Fire</strong></td>
<td><strong>Green Card</strong></td>
<td><strong>What Women Want</strong></td>
<td><strong>Bridesmaids</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>An American Werewolf in London</strong></td>
<td><strong>Father of the Bride</strong></td>
<td><strong>Bridget Jones’ Diary</strong></td>
<td><strong>Fast and Furious 5</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elephant Man</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Addams Family</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cast Away</strong></td>
<td><strong>Tangled</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flash Gordon</strong></td>
<td><strong>City Slickers</strong></td>
<td><strong>Miss Congeniality</strong></td>
<td><strong>Red Dog</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Paherty Blues</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sleeping with the Enemy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pearl Harbor</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cars 2</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Legend**
- **Original**: No direct antecedent in film or other medium. May be the first film in a sequel/series/franchise, marked *.
- **Adaptation**: Direct antecedent in another medium but not film. May be the first film in a sequel/series/franchise, marked *.
- **Re-make**: Re-make of an earlier film with the same or similar title.
- **Sequel, series, franchise**: A film in a series of films produced from the same underlying material by the same or a related production entity and/or under licence from the holder of rights in the underlying material. Underlying material means narrative, characters and/or milieu.

**Figure 2** – Top 10 grossing films, Australia, 1981-2011, categorised as original, adaptation, re-make or sequel/series/franchise – shows the rising dominance of franchise movies and the decline of ‘originals’, although it also confirms that adaptations and franchises were common even before the Multiplex Era. This is especially so if one adds to the movies formally categorised as sequels those based on true stories, which brought a kind of ‘brand awareness’ even when they arrived in cinemas as ‘originals’ – *Gallipoli* and *Chariots of Fire* in 1981, *Moulin Rouge* and *Pearl Harbour* in 2001.

**Producing Franchise Films**

Until the 2000s, franchises generally developed one film at a time. A big success motivated a sequel; a successful sequel motivated another. Each sequel typically earned less than its predecessor, and the series stopped when the box office for the latest film demonstrated it was losing its appeal. Even if a property like the Batman comics was acquired in the hope that more than one movie would be made from it, in practice the movie budgets were committed one at a time. From the late-1990s, that changed:
Three prequels to the Star Wars trilogy were produced by Lucasfilm and released in 1999, 2002 and 2005. The original movie, released in 1977, was followed by two sequels, The Empire Strikes Back in 1980 and Return of the Jedi in 1983. When writing the sequels, the plot evolved to provide a back-story as well, seeding the idea for the three prequels eventually produced from the mid-late 1990s. A further film was produced and released in 2008; by then, another set of three sequels was being discussed. In 2012, Disney bought Lucasfilm and has been announcing details of the creative line-ups for the three sequels. The inflation-adjusted US box office of the franchise has followed the old rule-of-thumb: the first two sequels earned less than the previous film, and the three prequels earned less than the original trilogy (Block & Wilson, 2010).

In 1998, New Line, the makers of the Nightmare on Elm Street, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and House Party movie series, committed to produce three The Lord of the Rings movies. This followed the structure of J. R. Tolkien’s three books but expanded the compressed two-movie proposal Peter Jackson pitched to New Line. Principal photography was undertaken in a single shoot but the extensive CGI, editing and post-production targeted sequential release over what became three successive Christmases in 2001, 2002 and 2003. Unlike the old expectation, each movie grossed more than the previous one at the US and worldwide box office (Box Office Mojo, February 13, 2013). New Line Cinema and MGM Pictures committed to a package of two movies based on Tolkien’s Rings ‘prequel’, The Hobbit, in December 2007, with Jackson as executive producer. A third film was confirmed in July 2012. The first, The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey, was released at Christmas 2012; the other two are expected in December 2013 and July 2014.

The success of The Matrix, released in 1999, encouraged its co-producers, Village Roadshow Pictures and Warner Bros, to make two sequels in a single shoot. The Matrix Reloaded and The Matrix Revolutions were released in the United States and Australia in 2003 about six months apart: the first took much more at the box office than the original film, the second less.

J. K. Rowling’s first Harry Potter book was published in the United Kingdom in 1997 and the United States in 1998. Warner Bros committed to make them into movies in two stages: the first four, then the final three, the last of which became two movies shot back-to-back. This delivered close to a Potter movie a year throughout the early 21st century: 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2011. According to Box Office Mojo (March 18, 2013), the unadjusted worldwide gross box office of the last was the highest of the eight.

Of these four 21st century franchises, film historian Kristin Thompson (2007) says The Lord of the Rings – the ‘Frodo Franchise’ – “can fairly claim to be one of the most historically significant films ever made. It is difficult to grasp the overall impact that it has had and will go on having” (pp. 8-9). The Star Wars, James Bond and Star Trek franchises were more extensive:

... but Rings appeared over such a short period of time – three long films in twenty-four months – that its earning power was concentrated. The enormous affection that its fans felt for the film meant that the franchise will live on well after Return’s departure from theatres. In a way, Rings is the perfect franchise – strong enough to maintain its commercial potential and yet self-contained enough as a narrative not to beget a series that outstays its welcome. (Thompson, 2007, p. 7)

Adam Smith, too, calls the Lord of the Rings trilogy:

Without any doubt the single most important event in popular cinema of the 21st century so far ... [It] stands in relation to American cinema in the 2000s as the Star Wars series did in the 1970s and early 1980s. It turned a generation on to film; radically altered the kinds of films that were being made ... has been resold, pimped out and marketed to within an inch of its life .... (Smith, 2012, p. 163)
Yet all four franchises described above seem to offer different models of the franchise concept and how it might be deployed in the cinema in the future:

- *Star Wars* revived and extended a movie franchise a generation after it began.
- *The Matrix* created a new franchise, short and sharp, by producing two sequels simultaneously.
- *The Lord of the Rings* turned an old, celebrated book franchise into a contemporary movie franchise once digital movie-making technology could deliver the kind of experience for audiences that Tolkien’s story had offered to readers.
- *Harry Potter* started turning a new book franchise into a movie franchise before all the promised books were even written: cinema audiences had seen four Potter movies before Rowling’s readers had got hold of the seventh and last book in 2007. Potter became a decade-long cascade of book and movie launches, a single narrative that advanced in parallel in different media.

The decision to turn *The Lord of the Rings*’ literary prequel, *The Hobbit*, into three more movies from the same story-world continued the trend for some of the most popular big screen story-telling in the 21st century. Instead of one-off movies like *Gone with the Wind* and *The Sound of Music* that played and played through the long theatrical runs of the pre-Multiplex Era, many of the most popular movie-makers of the 21st century are constructing sprawling narratives that they tell by instalment, one movie at a time, hoping audiences will commit to the whole thing and build rather than decline as the story reaches its climax. In this way, the advertising that is concentrated around the theatrical release still invariably used to launch big feature films not only provides a rolling, long-term marketing campaign, but repeatedly draws attention to earlier titles already available on DVD and online. Drawing on the well-established serial and series formats of television drama, we might call this trend the ‘televisionisation’ of cinema.

**Conclusion**

This analysis of the commercial performance of movie blockbusters at the Australian box office since the 1980s has found that the scale of the theatrical release of films rose through the era, but the share of the box office earned by the very biggest films fell. Although there are now more big films at the Australian box office, the very biggest individual films of the Multiplex Era are generally smaller *in cinemas* than those of the pre-Multiplex Era. This does not necessarily mean that less people get to see particular blockbusters overall: there are now many more ways to see movies outside cinemas that did not exist before the 1980s, including pay TV, DVD and online. Nor does it mean that less people get to experience the story-worlds of the biggest movies, even in cinemas, because so many of the highest-grossing movies now are parts of franchises, or series of films. Unlike our finding for individual movies, our analysis concludes that as a group, the biggest franchises of the Multiplex Era, especially those beginning in the late 20th and early 21st century, have outperformed their predecessors.

We interpret these findings in two ways. First, they show clearly the distribution strategy for blockbusters in the Multiplex Era. Movies are released on a much larger number of screens, enabling more screening sessions of big titles and concentrating box office earnings in a shorter theatrical window. Theatrical runs are deliberately curtailed to move titles into ‘ancillary’ markets where distribution costs are lower, freeing high-cost cinema screens for the next aspiring blockbusters with their blockbuster marketing campaigns. Second, the findings show a compressed cycle of cultural consumption in the cinema that has helped motivate a significant trend in a good deal of its most popular stories. By setting out to tell many of its stories by instalment, we suggest that the most commercially successful cinema of the early 21st century has been ‘televisionised’. We hope to explore this concept further in our next phase of research.
References


Data

Box Office Mojo: Box Office Mojo (boxofficemojo.com) and The Numbers (thenumbers.com) were used to assist in identifying franchises and the films that comprise them.
Inflation adjustment: Box office earnings were adjusted for inflation to 2012 prices. For earnings from 1948, the Consumer Price Index: All Groups was used (ABS cat. no. 6401.0, June 2012). For 2012, the index number used is the average of the first two quarters, matching the box office data that was current at 12 July 2012. For earnings before 1948, composite index numbers were derived from the retail/consumer prices indices published in Year Book Australia 2012 (ABS cat. no. 1301.0, May 2012). Where a film earned box office revenue in more than one calendar year, earnings were adjusted using the separate price indices for each year.

MPDAA: The principal source of data in this paper is the Motion Picture Distributor’s Association of Australia. MPDAA members at August 2013 are Twentieth Century Fox Film Distributors, Paramount Pictures Australia, Sony Pictures Releasing, Universal Pictures International Australasia, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures Australia and Warner Brothers Entertainment Australia.

Renttrak: US company Renttrak Corporation tracks overnight box office in more than 20 countries including Australia. Data is primarily collected through an electronic connection with theatre box offices throughout Australia. Data is available from 1997.

Newspaper and Magazine Articles
Separations bridged by recordings (1965, April 1). Sydney Morning Herald, p. 28.

About the Authors
Jock Given is Professor of Media and Communications at Swinburne University’s Institute for Social Research. He researches, writes and teaches about communications policy, law and history. His work has been published in Telecommunications Policy, the Journal of Information Policy, Info - The Journal of Policy, Regulation and Strategy for Telecommunications, Information and Media, Business History, Media History, the Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, and the Historical Records of Australian Science. His radio documentary Empire State: Ernest Fisk and the World Wide Wireless was first broadcast by ABC Radio National’s Hindsight program in 2012. Jock previously worked as Director of the Communications Law Centre, Policy Advisor at the Australian Film Commission and Director, Legislation and Industry Economics in the Department of Transport and Communications.

Rosemary Curtis is a freelance researcher specialising in screen-based media. From 1990 to 2009 she was the Research Manager at the Australian Film Commission and its successor, Screen Australia. In 2000 she was awarded the Australian Communications Research Forum Award for Outstanding Contribution to Research in an area of Communications.

Marion McCutcheon has worked as a consulting economist and communications policy analyst, and as an adviser and researcher with the Australian Broadcasting Authority, the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, and the Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics. Her qualifications include a PhD dissertation on media policy, ‘Is Pay TV Meeting its Promise?’, completed in 2006, and degrees in economics and finance, and mathematics and statistics. She is currently contributing to ‘Spreading Fictions’, a joint project between the ABC, Screen Australia, Swinburne University’s Institute for Social Research and teaching economics and statistics at the University of Wollongong.
Heads and Tails

The Long Tail in Australian Media Markets

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Abstract

This paper analyses sales of products within three Australian media markets – cinema box office, DVD retail and book retail – from 2002 to 2011. Several conclusions are drawn. First, significant long tail characteristics emerged in the books and particularly DVD markets, but not cinema, over the period. Second, where the number of titles selling in a market is changing rapidly, the choice of metric is vital for analysing the existence of a long tail. Third, across all three media, the analysis shows the oldest and most open market – books – has, by a narrow margin, the strongest blockbuster characteristics. Fourth, although the tail has grown for books and DVDs, it is very long and very, very thin. Finally, although this analysis has used three media products that involve comparable consumer transactions and analysed them as discrete markets, there are significant relationships between them which we hope to analyse in further research.

Keywords: long tail; cinema; book publishing; DVD; home entertainment

Introduction

In the years following the dot.com crash, Wired Magazine’s Chris Anderson adopted a concept from statistics, the ‘long tail’, to describe how the internet had opened the doors to a new business model by driving demand from the head of the sales distribution curve to the tail (Anderson, 2004, 2006). Companies such as Amazon and iTunes were generating new supply economics, offering a wider range of digital goods and services with reduced storage and transaction costs.

Anderson’s story popularised a developing body of academic writing on the effect of the internet on consumer and producer welfare and on product supply chains. In a world of physical constraints and scarce supply, markets for information goods had traditionally been dominated by small proportion disproportionately profitable blockbusters. This was for several reasons: customers choose recognised or greater talent over unknowns; they find social value in consuming the same cultural goods as friends; and larger sellers can take advantage of economies of scale on popular products and offer them for lower prices.

In the 2010 re-print of their 1995 book The Winner-Take-All Society, Frank and Cook wrote that, although the long tail might allow increased vibrancy and diversity of cultural products, they thought blockbuster markets had by no means run their course. By helping content creators to pursue a global audience, modern communications technologies may even have accentuated the extent to which small differences in talent and sheer luck can produce jackpot rewards (Elberse, 2008; Frank & Cook, 2010).
Here we are interested in how these shifts in technology and supply economics have affected the purchasing choices of Australian consumers. We examine how the sales of three media changed through the early 2000s.

**Researching the Long Tail Effects**

In their research commentary, Brynjolfsson, Hu and Smith (2010b) identify four areas of long tail/blockbuster research. First, research about the existence of long tail and superstar outcomes in different environments suggests more niche titles are being supplied to markets, but customers are not necessarily shopping the new long tail (Brynjolfsson, Hu & Smith, 2010a; Elberse, 2008; McKenzie, 2010; Michaels, 2008; Page & Garland, 2009; Walls, 2010).

The second research area is the effect of the long tail on supply chains and the growth of the firm. Changes in purchasing dynamics not only flow on to suppliers, but also affect cross-channel competition and competition between retailers (Brynjolfsson, Hu & Rahman, 2009). The long tail has underpinned the growth of many internet success stories – Google, eBay, Facebook as well as Amazon and iTunes all rely on accessing a broader customer base than can occur offline. Distribution, promotion and transaction channels are now, at least in theory, available to anyone. Whether this will weaken or strengthen the role of gatekeepers remains an open question.

Brynjolffson, Hu and Smith’s third research area is the effect of the long tail on the marketing strategies of price, promotion and product. (Place, here the internet, represents the fourth P of marketing.) This encompasses a wide range of possible research questions and approaches (Elberse, 2010; Goh & Bockstedt, 2008; Zhou & Duan, 2009). A growing body of literature examines the effect of search engines and recommendation tools on demand (Cachon, Terwiesch & Xu, 2008; Fleder & Hosanagar, 2009; Oestreich-Singer & Sundararajan, 2012).

The fourth area is the effect of the long tail on society. As well as economic of welfare measures such as consumer and producer surplus, research in this area also encompasses the question of whether long tail consumption patterns will lead to a global village of informed citizens or to “fractured communications between balkanized groups of consumers” (Brynjolfsson et al., 2010b, p. 742).

This paper addresses Brynjolfsson, Hu and Smith’s first research area, the existence of long tail and superstar or blockbuster outcomes in different environments in Australian media since the early 2000s. We analyse sales of products within different media markets – cinema box office, DVD retail and book retail – over time, from 2002 to 2011. This extends existing research on long tail effects in Australian media: Elberse’s work on Quickflix, which examined six months of DVD rental data, and McKenzie’s analysis of DVD revenues for titles achieving initial box office release (Elberse, 2008; McKenzie, 2010).

**The Data**

Cinema, DVDs and books were selected for analysis because they involve comparable consumer transactions but have very different histories and sales distributions (Figure 1). In all three markets, consumers make discrete purchases of individual titles or viewings of titles. Books have been around for centuries; cinemas for more than a century; DVDs, in Australia, only since 1998. Books and movies are both first-release distribution windows, DVD, as a secondary market, may be regarded in itself as part of a long tail for movies and television programs and is influenced by previous release windows (e.g. McKenzie, 2010; Walls, 2010). Here we use retail sales statistics to examine consumption of these three media.

Box office statistics are collected in Australia from distributors by the Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia (MPDAA). The primary data covers box office revenue for all films screening commercially in Australian cinemas each calendar year, including new releases and re-releases. The
The number of admissions for each title is not supplied directly, but is estimated using an annual average admission price, supplied by the MPDAA (Screen Australia, 2012b).

Australian DVD sales statistics are collected by GfK Retail and Technology Australia, through major retailers. The data is collected from a panel of 1,500 stores, covering around 71% of Australian DVD sales (Screen Australia, 2012a). Blu-ray and VHS are excluded from this analysis, to minimise the risk of confounding the results. Blu-ray was first recorded in the GfK statistics in 2008, and by 2011 represented about 12% of all Australian video sales. VHS sales fell below 2% of total video sales in 2005 and were collected for the last time in 2007. BluRay sales revenues and units are included in the Industry Aggregates section below.

Book sales have been recorded in Australia by Nielsen BookScan since 2003. Data is collected from a fixed panel of over 1,000 retailers covering about 85% of retail book sales (Nielsen BookScan, 2012). BookScan data includes physical sales by Australian retailers via shops and websites. It does not include online sales to Australian customers by offshore suppliers or ebooks.

These retail data sets have significant advantages over a unique sample survey: they provide time series running at least ten years for box office and DVD sales, and since 2003 for book sales; and, although they are not census collections, they each represent at least 70% of relevant sales within each media in each year. The data sets do, however, have two important limitations. First, because they do not include all internet sales within Australia, or any internet sales to Australian consumers from overseas suppliers like Amazon, they do not provide a complete picture of any long tail in Australian customer demand. This seems likely to be a bigger issue for books than for DVDs, because region-coding of DVDs provides at least some barrier to purchasing from off-shore. Second, because the GfK and BookScan data include titles selling at least one unit in Australia in the relevant years, they do not show all titles available for sale, which may have sold at least one unit in a previous period.

All sales revenue data quoted in the paper are converted into constant, or real, dollars using the consumer price index (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2012).

Method

There are different ways of measuring and comparing the blockbuster and long tail characteristics of sales distributions, again usefully summarised by Brynjolfsson et al. (2010b). These include:

- **The relative distribution of revenue or sales units describes sales in proportional terms.** An example is the principle that 20% of products offered generate 80% of revenue. Here we adopt a more detailed approach, calculating the sales generated by each decile of products offered to the market. This relative metric has a significant disadvantage: it may not reveal a developing long tail in a growing sales distribution. Looking for long tail effects in a growing market using only a relative measure can suggest unhelpfully that the head and tail are both getting bigger as all deciles increase. Examples of this approach include Elberse (2008), and Tan and Netessine (2009).

- **Revenue generated or units sold for an absolute number of titles.** This approach partitions the sales distribution into fixed sets of titles (e.g. top 10, top 50). An absolute measure is more likely to reveal the emergence of a long tail, because any growth in the number of titles offered to the market can be separated from the pre-defined sets of top titles. This approach, also, is not without faults. Selecting the sets of top titles is fairly arbitrary. Interpreting what is meant by the ‘top X’ titles can be tricky: it could represent a large or small proportion of titles depending on the characteristics of the product. Examples here include Brynjolfsson, Hu and Smith’s (2003) measure of sales above a cut-off of 100,000 book titles.
The Gini coefficient, a ratio that measures inequality within a frequency distribution, is traditionally used to quantify the distribution of income or wealth within an economy. More recently it has found a role in measuring distribution equality in biological and engineering systems and in measuring long tail effects. The Gini coefficient is calculated as a ratio and as such is a variation on the relative metric. Examples include Brynjolfsson, Hu and Simester (2011), Ehrmann and Schmale (2008), and Oestreicher-Singer and Sundararajan (2012).

The relationship between rank and revenue or units. Modelling the slope of the sales distribution can demonstrate its bias away from or towards the head of the tail. Examples of research examining the relationship between rank and sales include Huberman’s (2001) use of a power law to describe the relative popularity of websites, and Brynjolfsson et al.’s (2010a) and Page and Garland’s (2009) findings that sales distributions may not strictly follow a power law. Walls (2010) adds a quadratic term to the power law, capturing information feedback effects in the demand for DVDs, while McKenzie (2010) compares estimates of tail weight parameters for box office and DVD revenues.

Each of these approaches provides limited information about a sales distribution and how it might change over time, and results can be ambiguous. For example, Anderson criticised Tan and Netessine’s proportional analysis of Netflix DVD rentals, arguing that a relative analysis of the head and tail of demand was meaningless in a market with unlimited inventory (see Peoples, 2009; ‘Rethinking the long tail theory’, 2009; Tan & Netessine, 2009). So, rather than rely on one metric, here we apply measures from the first three of these categories to examine how box office and retail sales of books and DVDs changed in Australia during a period of increasing competition from online sales channels.

Industry Aggregates

Over the ten years of our analysis, aggregated data for the three sectors show striking similarities and differences (Figure 1). Total revenue was remarkably similar for much of the period. Between 2004 and 2010, revenue from each of these sectors ranged between $1.0 billion and $1.4 billion in 2011 dollars. Combined DVD and BluRay sales revenue rose sharply into that range at the start of the period and fell just as sharply out of it in 2011. It exceeded box office revenue for the first time in 2005 but fell back below it in 2010 after peaking in 2007. Books, like DVD and BluRay sales, fell in real terms in 2010 and 2011 after rising throughout the decade. Cinema revenue increased between 2002 and 2011, but fell sharply in 2005. Analysts commonly attribute the recent decline in book sales to: the take-up of e-reading and the collapse of REDGroup, which controlled Borders and Angus & Robertson bookstores in Australia (Rosenblum, 2012); the decline in DVD sales to online video streaming and downloading (Dale, 2011; Kalina, 2012); and the decline in cinema in 2005, to some extent, to the then increasing popularity of DVDs and home theatre systems (Zion, 2005).

The patterns for unit sales are similar, but the differences between the sectors are much more significant. Cinema admissions were consistently higher than unit sales for both books and DVDs and BluRay disks – although some care should be taken in interpreting the time series as admissions are estimated using the average ticket price published by the MPAA. Mean revenue per unit sold shows that, although cinema tickets got a little more expensive during the study period, DVDs and books became much cheaper, closing the gap dramatically.

The really startling differences lie in the number of titles sold. Figure 1 uses a logarithmic scale to demonstrate this. In 2011, 437 films screened in Australian cinemas (342 new releases during the year), and around 36,000 DVD titles and 630,000 book titles sold at least one copy. The annual number of films screening in cinemas increased by a quarter through the period. The number of books sold at least one copy more than doubled from around a quarter of a million in 2003, the year Booksan began collecting data. The number of DVDs rose faster but then crashed, increasing nearly ten-fold between 2002 and 2009 before falling 20% in the two years to 2011.
Although the growth in books and DVDs was strong, the fact that they grew faster than film titles at the cinema is not surprising: films are shown and then move out of cinemas, often within weeks; book and DVD titles are cumulative, with best sellers remaining on catalogues for years.

There are also significant differences in the proportion of the total inventory that can be offered for sale across Australia’s roughly 500 theatres (with around 2,000 screens), up to 1,000 bookshops (plus department stores and newsagents) and up to 10,000 DVD retail outlets (Good Reading, 2012; Romano, 2008). For example:

- Movie theatres are subject to physical and time constraints (seats, screens and the number of screenings possible in a day) that limit their offerings (Eliashberg et al., 2009). For example, in the screening week beginning Thursday 1 November 2012, Marion Megaplex in Adelaide had 30 separate titles screening (plus 3D versions of four of the same titles). The chain of which it is part, Event Cinemas, had 59 films screening across the country (plus the 3D versions) including 17 titles in the Jewish Film Festival screening only at Bondi Junction (Event Cinemas, 2012a, 2012b).

- A large DVD shop might stock between 500 and 1,500 DVD titles (Brynjolfsson, Hu & Smith, 2006). In November 2012, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) listed 7,257 DVDs for sale on its website, while Sanity listed a total of 21,828 DVDs, both excluding music (ABC, 2012; Sanity, 2012).

- One industry observer estimates that the average department and discount store in Australia carries about 1,000 book titles and the ‘average’ independent or chain bookstore around 2,000-3,000 titles, although the figures range widely from about 5,000 titles for a big independent like Readings in Carlton to about 1,000 for the small Paperback Bookstore in central Melbourne (M. Webster, personal communication, December 10, 2012).

The rapid turnover of titles is particularly obvious in cinemas, but it is a feature of all three media.
Analysis – Relative versus Absolute Measures

To allow like-with-like comparisons, we compile the sales data for each media sector using relative and absolute measures. For the relative metric, we calculate revenue generated by each decile of titles in each year. For the absolute metric, definitions of the head are fixed at the numbers of titles that represented the top deciles in the first year of each time series:

- An ‘extreme’ head – the top 20 titles. This is chosen subjectively to be high enough to represent extreme blockbusters but low enough to minimise volatility.
- Top titles. Each definition of the head is set as a constant number of titles using the top 10%, top 20% and top 50% of titles by sales revenue in the first year of each series. The definitions for each media sector are different, but each captures a similar proportion of sales (Table 1).
- The tail. The tail is fixed as all titles other than the top 50% in the first year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Number of titles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Box office</strong></td>
<td><strong>DVs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 20 titles (extreme head)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 10% in year 1</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 20% in year 1</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 50% in year 1</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tail</td>
<td>201+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Absolute metric: Number of titles in each revenue category

**Cinema Box Office**

Using either the relative or the absolute measures, cinema shows itself to be a blockbuster business (Figure 2 and Figure 3). Using the relative metric, between 2002 and 2011:

- The top 10% of titles generated an average of 62% of revenue over the study period;
- The top 20% of titles generated an average of 83% of revenue;
- The top 50% of titles generated an average of 98% of revenue; and
- The tail, the bottom 50% of titles, generated an average of 2% of revenue.

Looking at the absolute metric over the same period:

- The extreme head, the top 20 titles, generated an average of 44% of revenue;
- The top 40 titles generated an average of 63% of revenue;
- The top 80 titles generated an average of 84% of revenue; and
- The tail, about 200 titles and equivalent to about 50% of titles throughout the time series, generated no more than 2% of revenue.

The results produced by the two metrics are similar and steady over the period. Independent of measurement technique, a fairly small share of movies generated the vast majority of box office revenue. Box office might not quite be a winner-takes-all market, but it is a winner-takes-most. There appears here to be no evidence that a long tail has emerged for the Australian box office, although we note that MPDAA data does not cover films that screen only in film festivals.
The DVD data tells different stories through the relative and absolute metrics. DVD sales revenue grew through the first decade of the 2000s, and is now in decline – the relative measure shows this growth as an increasing head (Figure 4); the absolute measure shows a developing long tail (Figure 5).

For the relative measure, as the number of titles sold in Australia increases, so does the number of titles falling into each decile. As the top deciles capture both the revenue generated by blockbusters and an increasing number of popular titles, they attract not only more revenue in real terms but also a growing proportion of total revenue. Looking at the proportion of revenue earned by different groups of titles over the study period:

- The top 10% of titles generated 70% of total revenue in 2002 and 78% in 2011;
- The top 20% generated 83% of total revenue in 2002 and 91% in 2011;
- The top 50% generated 96% of total revenue in 2002 and 99% in 2009; and
- The tail, the bottom 50%, generated 4% of total revenue in 2002 and 1% in 2009.

By defining the head as a fixed number of titles through the time series, the absolute measure reveals the growth of a long tail for DVD titles. Between 2002 and 2011, revenue generated by:

- The top 20 DVD titles fell from 20% to 7% of total revenue;
- The top 500 DVD titles fell from 71% to 41%;
The top 1,000 DVD titles fell from 84% to 53%; and
The tail (titles 2,501 and up) increased from 3% to 30%.

For DVD sales, then, the metrics provide different insights into the changing nature of the market. The absolute metric provides a different perspective – the head of the sales distribution has shrunk since 2004. By contrast, the tail, defined as all titles outside the top 2,500, grew strongly. By 2008, the tail of DVD retail sales was long – nearly 40,000 DVD titles – and contributed almost one-third of sales revenue. A long tail now appears to be a steady feature of the DVD sales distribution.

For book sales, the relative and absolute metrics for books also reveal different trends due to growing numbers of titles, although book sales are even more blockbuster-driven than DVD or cinema. Similar to DVD sales, book sales grew in real terms through the 2000s, but fell from their 2009 peak to around 2003 levels in 2011. Unlike DVDs, however, the number of book titles sold in Australia kept growing. Using the relative metric, as with DVDs, the top deciles of titles attracted a growing proportion of revenue as the number of titles sold in Australia increased (Figure 6). Between 2003 and 2011:

- Revenue generated by the top 10% of titles increased from 83% to 88% of total revenue;
- Revenue generated by the top 20% of titles increased from 91% to 93% of total revenue;
- The top 50% of titles generated a steady average of 98% of revenue; and
- The tail, the bottom 50% of titles, generated an average of 2% of revenue.
The growth in revenue generated by the top deciles of book titles reflects increases in units sold. Average prices fell for all decile groups between 2003 and 2011 – for example, the average price of titles in the top decile fell from $24 to $17, for the second decile from $31 to $22, and for the relative tail from $51 to $31.

The absolute measure, on the other hand, shows evidence of an emerging long tail for books (Figure 7). Between 2003 and 2011, revenue generated by:

- The top 20 book titles fell from 7% to 4% of total revenue;
- The top 25,000 titles fell from 83% to 76%;
- The top 50,000 titles fell from 91% to 85%; and
- The tail (titles 125,001 and up) increased from 2% to 7% – the number of titles in the tail grew from around 127,000 in 2003 to just over 505,000 in 2011.

The falls in books sales revenue in 2010 and 2011 occurred within the head of the sales distribution, reflecting both falls in prices and in units sold. The tail, defined by the absolute metric, actually grew during these years, from $59 million in 2009 to $72 million in 2011. This was driven by increases in unit sales, as average prices fell from $35 to $27.

This analysis also reveals striking differences in the unit sales of titles in the heads and tails for the three media, because of the enormous differences in the numbers of titles that sell (Table 2). For cinema, a movie in the head, using either metric, attracted between 800,000 and 900,000 admissions in 2011. One in the tail attracted around 5,000, many times more than the average sales of a title in the head of the distribution for books. In the long, long tail for books in 2011 – around 125,000 titles using the relative measure and more than 500,000 using the absolute measure – a title averaged sales of just a handful of copies.
Analysis – Sales Concentration

Although developed as a measure of income equality, the Gini coefficient has more recently been adopted as a measure of concentration of product sales. It takes a value of zero where sales are perfectly evenly distributed, and increases towards one as sales become more concentrated. Gini coefficients for information goods tend to take higher values than those for nations’ incomes. McKenzie (2010), for example, found Gini coefficients of 0.65 and 0.75 for Australian box office and DVD revenues for a sample of theatrical films subsequently released on DVD, while the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) currently estimates Australia’s Gini coefficient (before taxes and transfers) at 0.47 (OECD, 2013).

Here, we calculate Gini coefficients empirically for box office and DVD sales for each year from 2002 to 2011. For books, the study has access to sales data for the top 5,000 titles only, and summary data for each decile of the remaining sales distribution. We calculate the portion of the Gini coefficient relating to the top 5,000 books empirically, and estimate the balance by modelling the log-linear cumulative sales distribution (or Lorenz curve) using the summary data and ordinary least squares regression (Figure 8). This approach seems reasonable: Brynjolfsson et al. (2011) found their Gini estimates for different sales channels were robust by comparing estimates based on transactions for all products and for a random sample.

Throughout the study period, the Gini coefficients for box office are lower than those for book and DVD sales, implying that box office sales are consistently less concentrated than those of the other media (Figure 9). Over time, the Gini estimates appear to be increasing slowly. Interpretation of the increase is not, however, straightforward. Like the relative metric, the Gini coefficient is a proportion, and may be misleading where titles are increasing (Brynjolfsson et al., 2010b). To control for growth in the number of titles...
titles, especially of books and DVDs, we also calculate an alternative ‘absolute Gini’ using a fixed number of top titles over the study period for each media.

As with the absolute metric in the previous section, selecting the top titles for each media is necessarily subjective. We set the limit as the top 50% of titles in the first year of each time series: the top 150,000 titles for books and the top 200 movies for box office. For DVDs, we set the limit at 10,000 titles, and only estimated the Gini coefficient from 2004 because of the high rate of growth in the number of titles available in the market.

Looking at change in the full and absolute Gini coefficients supports the observations we have already made, that book and DVD sales both demonstrate a growing long tail, but that books are more blockbuster-driven.

- For box office, both the Gini coefficients increased slightly, although the absolute Gini is lower. Note that our Gini estimates are higher than those estimated by McKenzie (2010). This is not surprising – our estimates include all theatrical releases and McKenzie’s only those subsequently released on DVD. Our higher estimates include more films generating low revenues and therefore suggests a more concentrated market.
- The coefficients for DVDs move in different directions over time. Here, DVD’s emerging long tail drives the full Gini estimate higher. The absolute Gini, however, shows sales of the top 10,000 titles becoming more evenly distributed, before shifting back towards the blockbusters in 2010 and 2011.
- The Gini coefficient for books is very robust, and insensitive to growth in titles. We tested how much of the sales distribution we would need to eliminate before book sales appeared less concentrated – in 2011, the top 50,000 titles yielded an absolute coefficient of 0.88 and the top 1,000 titles a coefficient of 0.76. Not only is the book sector the most concentrated of the three media, it is also the media with the most narrowly-defined head.

![Figure 9](image_url)  
**Figure 9** – Gini coefficients for books, box office and DVDs, 2002 to 2011  
Sources: GfK Australia, MPDAA, Nielsen Bookscan

**Conclusion**

We draw several conclusions and pointers to further research from this analysis. First, the long tail is real for some media. Although, as earlier authors have found, the relative metric demonstrates the continuing validity of simple ‘80/20 rule’ characterisations of the cinema, DVD and books markets in Australia, this metric alone masks the emergence of significant long tail characteristics in the book and particularly DVD markets over the last decade.

Second, where the number of titles available and selling in a market is changing rapidly, the choice of metric is vital for analysing the shifts in demand and supply that might reveal a long tail. For all three
media studied here, the relative metrics demonstrate the durability of the blockbuster, generally revealing a bigger head and smaller tail over the study period. The absolute metrics, however, reveal a growing long tail for books and particularly DVDs that coincides initially with growth in the number of titles sold by Australian retailers, but now appears to be a feature of their sales distributions. How the market is defined also determines the shape of any eventual long tail. If, for example, this analysis was performed on movie titles in all exhibition windows, rather than by media, we may have found a differently shaped tail that extended from theatrical release through to DVD sale.

Third, across all three media, on either metric, the oldest and most open market – books – has, by a narrow margin, the strongest blockbuster characteristics. This contradicts the idea that demand will fragment inexorably and continuously as technology lifts supply constraints. It supports Frank and Cook’s argument (2010) that access to a global audience might tend to accentuate jackpot rewards and further encourage publishers, producers and distributors to pursue them. Although, as noted at the outset, the data used – especially for books – does not provide a complete picture of any long tail in Australian customer demand.

Fourth, although the tail has grown for books and DVDs, it is very long and, especially for books, very, very thin. Like the long tails identified by Elberse (2008) and Page and Garland (2009), the tails observed here include a vast number of titles that sell only rarely. Knowing that the long tail is indeed very long is useful for businesses that can aggregate a lot of such titles; it is not so useful commercially for small-scale producers of the titles that sit, largely unwanted, on the shelf or server.

Finally, although this analysis has used three media products that involve comparable consumer transactions and analysed them as discrete markets, there are significant relationships between them, as demonstrated by McKenzie (2010) and Walls (2010). Books are turned into films; films are sold on DVD. Cinema is essentially a first release market; the books market offers both first release titles and back catalogue; DVD is essentially, although not entirely, a back-catalogue market for the cinema and television. The book industry is not only driven by its blockbusters, it serves them up for cinematic consumption. DVD may be the box office’s long tail, but it is books that often begin the blockbuster cycle, and are where movie-makers go to stick their long noses.

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References


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Communicating Food Policy Issues
Media and the Politics of Sustainability

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Abstract
There is increasing concern that pressures on the global food system present a major threat to human and environmental health, but that awareness of ecological challenges is not being translated into social and political action of the degree and type needed to address them. This suggests a need to understand how citizens conceptualise and respond to food-related risks and threats in the contexts of their everyday lives where demands on their attention, time and hip-pockets are significant and immediate. It requires that efforts to change individual consumption behaviours are complemented by an understanding of the social and discursive environments in which food meanings and practices are taken up. This paper draws upon emerging research on environmentally sustainable diets, Australia’s recently released National Food Plan, and a variety of literature on the politics of sustainability and media representations of food issues to identify questions for future research in this area. We highlight some of the limitations of efforts to change individual consumption behaviours through social marketing campaigns and identify the need to understand the links people make between food and the environment, how these are shaped by situated, local knowledge and experiences, and the role of media in shaping citizen-consumer views and the practices of key food-related interest groups.

Keywords: media; communication; food sustainability; food policy; framing

Introduction
Food system sustainability is an issue of growing international concern. Climate change, population growth, changing economic conditions, competition for resources, and diet-related health issues are among the challenges facing the food system (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF), 2013). Recent global and national policy documents have cited the vital role of consumer engagement, alongside production efficiency and system transformation, in meeting this challenge (United Nations, 2012; DAFF, 2013; Prime Minister’s Science, Engineering and Innovation Council, 2010). At the same time, we learn that awareness of ecological and wider sustainability challenges is not being translated into social and political action of the degree and type that is needed and that pro-sustainability values are not translated into actual consumption behaviours (Barry, 2005; Novacek, 2008; Prothero et al., 2011; Scerri, 2009). In short, the rhetoric of sustainability is often not matched by the reality (Gray, 2010).

This paper draws upon emerging research on environmentally sustainable diets, Australia’s recently released National Food Plan, and a variety of literature on the politics of sustainability and media representations of food issues. In doing so, it points to the complex interrelations and understandings that exist between policy, expert, media and consumer discourses. The paper suggests areas in which further research is needed given that the responsibility to address food system challenges is increasingly being
shifted onto consumers. We highlight some of the limitations of efforts to change individual consumption behaviours through social marketing campaigns and identify the need to understand the links people make between food and the environment, how these are shaped by situated, local knowledge and experiences, and the role of media in shaping consumer views and the practices of key food-related interest groups.

Emerging Research: Behaviours Required for an Environmentally Sustainable Diet

The question of what drives change in complex food systems is critical to the development of policy goals. One option advocated by some is the development of new dietary guidelines that combine nutrition with environmental considerations to give coherent advice (Lang & Barling, 2012). This section briefly reviews existing Australian guidelines for a healthy diet and emerging guidelines for a healthy and a sustainable diet. It draws from emerging research examining dietary behaviours that support sustainable food production and healthy eating (Pearson, Friel & Lawrence, in press; Friel, Lawrence & Pearson, 2012). That research aims to contribute evidence to assist government, and other stakeholders from industry and not-for-profit sectors, in providing advice to consumers, which may be included in policy documents such as the National Health and Medical Research Council’s (NHMRC) Australian Dietary Guidelines.

Whilst civilisations have thrived on vastly different diets that evolve from unique cultural, economic and agronomic contexts, within the contemporary Australian situation summary advice for a healthy diet is built around five guidelines, namely:

- **Guideline 1**: Be physically active and choose amounts of nutritious food and drinks to meet individual energy needs that maintain a healthy weight.
- **Guideline 2**: Drink plenty of water whilst eating a wide variety of foods from the five groups every day:
  - Vegetables, including different types and colours, and legumes/beans;
  - Fruits;
  - Grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain and/or high cereal fibre varieties;
  - Lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, and legumes/beans; and
  - Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or their alternatives.
- **Guideline 3**: Limit intake of alcohol and foods containing saturated fat, added salt and sugars.
- **Guideline 4**: Support breastfeeding.
- **Guideline 5**: Prepare and store food safely. (NHMRC, 2013)

Recent research has identified additional features that build on existing advice for a healthy diet to create a healthy and environmentally sustainable diet. The 12 additional features have been grouped into three categories around the product, its source and provisioning behaviours:

- **Food product**:
  - Adjusting consumption of meat to recommended dietary amount.
  - Adjusting consumption of dairy products to recommended dietary amount.
  - Adjusting consumption of junk food to amount for optimal enjoyment.
  - Hydrating from tap water rather than purchasing it in a bottle.
- **Source of food product**:
  - Minimising consumption of out-of-season products, particularly fresh fruits and vegetables.
  - Minimising consumption of fish from non-sustainable sources.
  - Increasing consumption of food from environmentally enhanced sources, such as certified organic.
- Reducing purchases of foods with packaging which is above that required for product protection.
- Reducing food transport by selecting more local options.
- Favouring less processed foods.

Behaviours around food provisioning:
- Reducing food waste, and recycling unavoidable waste.
- Reducing energy use in food purchases, storage and cooking. (Pearson et al., in press)

Hence the combination of advice for a healthy diet with these additional features creates what could be referred to as a ‘Theoretical Healthy and Sustainable Diet’. Ongoing work will specify the changes to behaviour that are required for consumers by comparing this Theoretical Diet with actual dietary behaviour including food intake as measured by the 2012 Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Australian Health Survey (Friel et al., 2012). However, to provide policy advice that facilitates enactment of change it is vital to identify factors that inform consumers’ dietary behaviour. This encompasses individual consumer’s attitudes and knowledge in relation to opportunities for and barriers to change. Factors at play might include affordability and availability, food preference, and level of commitment to environmental sustainability in relation to food. The meanings people attach to food and how they tie their identities to different food related practices are also important. Dietary advice must also be situated in the context of the wider ‘food information environment’ (Ferreira, 2006) in which a variety of actors and messages circulate, including those that might contest the features of an environmentally sustainable diet outlined above. Furthermore, in light of the disconnect between dietary guidelines and everyday life (Lindsay, 2010), it is important to consider how and for whom guidelines are developed, the uses to which they are put, and the wider policy context in which they sit.

The Sustainability Agenda: Some Conceptual Issues

Despite the accumulation of eco-political knowledge and the sense of urgency surrounding ecological issues, concerns persist about the scale and speed of policy measures (Blühdorn, 2007). There is a fundamental tension between the achievement of sustainability as requiring radical change in the most basic principles of late-modern societies and the general consensus about the non-negotiability of democratic consumer capitalism (Blühdorn & Welsh, 2007; Scerri, 2009). Blühdorn (2007) argues ‘simulative politics’ are a key strategy by which late-modern societies try to sustain what is known to be unsustainable. Petersen (2007) argues, while there may have been an integration of environmentalist vocabulary into public discourse, this rhetoric “remains detached from actual changes in societal practices towards sustainability” (p. 212). In short, much of the talk about sustainability and environmentalism takes place in a context where established lifestyles and patterns of economic development continue to be encouraged and maintained (Petersen, 2007). Some suggest we now live in a post-ecologist era characterised by the politics of unsustainability whereby the management of the inability and unwillingness to become sustainable has taken centre stage (Blühdorn & Welsh, 2007). Indeed, there is increasing recognition that food system sustainability is a fundamentally political project with cultural, social, and ideological dimensions, and not simply a set of ecological standards easily met by discerning consumers (Johnston, Biro & MacKendrick, 2009).

This brings us to the tenuous position of marketing and its potential to encourage sustainable consumption practices, given its role in driving consumption in pursuit of economic profit rather than environmental gains (Peattie & Peattie, 2009). This is where social marketing – as the marketing of messages directed at changing people’s behaviour for socially desirable goals, such as environmental gains, rather than promoting the consumption of certain products – seeks to offer an alternative approach. Also referred to as sustainable, anti-consumption, quality of life or welfare marketing (Varey, 2010), these approaches focus on how marketing can be used to promote sustainability and, ultimately, more sustainable forms of consumption (Burroughs, 2010). However, critical scholars view social marketing campaigns as a form of neoliberal governmentality in as much as their primary goal is individual behaviour change through the
internalisation of regimens of self-discipline (Crawshaw, 2012). In doing so they are seen as obscuring structural determinants. Empirical research also demonstrates that the discourses upon which they draw and present as though ‘common sense’ are often debated and resisted by individuals (Hobson, 2002; see also Crossley, 2002). In sum, there are limitations to what can be achieved through social marketing, as noted by Peattie and Peattie (2009):

Until material expectations become more realistic from a sustainability perspective, social marketing initiatives to create meaningful levels of consumption reduction may struggle to achieve the necessary level of support from consumers, investors and policy makers. (p. 267)

More pointedly, seeking to change individual consumption patterns is likely to have little constructive effect so long as the institutional interests that create and benefit from unsustainable practices remain intact and unchallenged. This resonates with what Cox (2010) and others identify as the need for discursive action to be more closely linked to social and political action. In the area of climate communication Cox links the failure of recent campaigns to a lack of strategic alignment between specific communicative efforts and their consequences within the economic, political and ideological systems in which policies are embedded (see also Brulle & Jenkins, 2006). For an issue such as food sustainability, this includes industrial practices and consumer behaviours, preference, values and the like. Campaigns that fail to appreciate this are unlikely to engage citizens in any sustained manner and, in the context of climate change, have been criticised for undermining the capacity for significant social change.

Scholarship in this area could build on the idea that ecological threats and the formation of ecological rationalities are more closely related to societal framing procedures than to scientific data. This might take the form of viewing (food) sustainability as a communicative problem that needs to be coded in such a way as to link into and irritate existing systems and communicative contexts (Blüdhorn, 1997). It does not mean disregarding facts about the strained productive capacity of the planet, but foregrounds the construction of food system challenges as social problems and the processes by which they become recognised as public issues. The focus becomes the discursive realities constructed by the multiple voices contributing to and implicated in the debate and the interests that shape their frames and actions (Blüdhorn, 1997; Grove-White, 1996; Hager, 1996; Jamison, 1996). What is their role in the politics of (un)sustainability? Where are they situated along the continuum of environmental to sustainability citizenship, the latter of which encompasses economic, social, political and cultural spheres (see Barry, 2005)?

It has been suggested that some accounts of sustainability, such as those found in business discourse, constitute powerful fictions that need to be challenged (Gray, 2010). Gray describes this as the ‘capture’ of the sustainability concept by powerful groups who use it to “distract attention from any conflicts that it might engender and the planetary context in which it must be understood” (p. 53). It is a process of appeasement directed at consumers, especially those who are increasingly believed to care about where their food comes from and the working conditions of those involved in the food supply chain, which takes the place of a serious accounting for the global dynamics of sustainability. Thus, there is a tension between the goal of engaging and mobilising citizens around the issue of food sustainability and concern that processes of mainstreaming or integrating sustainability thinking into discourses and practices run the risks of sanitising or diluting the issue.

The issue of food sustainability lends itself to further investigation of how different discourses variously seek to appeal to people in their roles as citizens and consumers and with what effect for how people respond. How do citizen-consumers interpret messages around sustainable food and to what extent are their practices informed by them? In what ways do people identify with (or distance themselves from) particular media and social marketing messages directed at encouraging them to be environmental citizens? How do health and environmental considerations figure in people’s food practices?

Australia’s National Food Plan identifies the goal of producing food sustainably and the demonstration of sustainability, in terms of improving the quality and accessibility of environmental information (DAFF,
2013). It highlights the increasing desire among consumers to have information about the environmental impacts of their food choices. Interestingly, for the purposes of this paper, it also mentions the importance of media and communication in enabling or constraining the community’s ongoing acceptance of operations and activities:

> Modern communications technology and social media channels are changing how people engage in debate, expanding the flow of information, widening the scope of the conversation, broadening opportunities for participation and increasing expectations about the speed of change. (DAFF, 2013, p. 49)

This statement recognises and attributes much to the role of new media and communication technologies within contemporary food information environments, but the precise ways in which they are generating public debate and mobilising public opinion and action in relation to food issues is an area for empirical investigation. Research could, for example, identify the range and type of apps and alternative consumption websites that enable consumers to learn about the provenance of food products, who uses them, and what social impact they are having. How are food activists and industry groups seeking to capitalise on the affordances of new technologies to advance their views and interests with respect to food sustainability? As a communicative problem, how is food sustainability made meaningful to audiences?

**Framing Practices and Food Information Environments**

The media industry is firmly implicated in the ‘politics of unsustainability’ referred to earlier in as much as it reinforces and promotes a culture of mass consumption that is seen by many to be fundamentally incompatible with the principles of sustainability (Blühdorn & Welsh, 2007). But media also create awareness about food issues, including risks, and serve as forums through which interest groups struggle for public attention and legitimacy (Blue, 2010; Lupton, 2004; Miller & Reilly, 1995). The idea of ‘mediatisation’ seeks to capture the interplay between media and other institutions and spheres of activity (Hjarvard, 2008). It brings an emphasis on how media shape the practices of other social actors and fields of action by becoming increasingly central to how they obtain/maintain legitimacy, recognition and public support. This section identifies findings from previous research in order to illustrate the manifold contribution of news and popular media to public discourse on food issues.

Research in the area of news framing has elaborated how media professionals ‘package’ information by using framing devices to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). News framing is conceived as a dynamic cultural process that reflects decisions about what is deemed significant or newsworthy, the constraints imposed by newsroom work and routines, and the cultural assumptions news professionals make about their audiences (Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2003; Schudson, 1995; Tuchman, 1978). Gitlin (1980) suggests excluded information is usually what audiences might find ambiguous, unpredictable or culturally unfamiliar. News also tends to be event-focused and stories can disappear quickly from the agenda as the next big issue emerges. This limits its ability to inform and mobilise publics around complex interconnected issues such as environment, health, agriculture and food. Distrust, emotional fatigue, indifference, ambivalence and powerlessness are just some of the responses that could result from the over-simplification of issues or focusing too much on the problem without explaining choices or options for action (Lockie, 2006; Olausson, 2011).

The news media play a major role in disseminating information, setting agendas, and framing issues for public debate and policymakers, and the way an issue is framed has much to do with who is doing the framing and their media-oriented practices. The authors of one study found that the framing power and devices used by scientists to publicise their research on obesity rates in Australia, along with the failure of news media to test their claims and seek out alternative viewpoints, potentially contributed to an environment in which calls for action and policy proposals are likely to be subjected to less scrutiny than warranted (Holland, Blood, Thomas, Lewis, Komesaroff & Castle, 2011). The media practices of official
sources can also undermine public trust in them as sources of reliable information. For example, in 2002 the Swedish National Food Administration was criticised for its role in generating ‘alarmist’ media coverage of the risks of acrylamide in starch-based foods (Ferreira, 2006). A particular concern was the agency’s crafting of its press release to fit the ‘news’ format, including using the headline, ‘Acrylamide in Food Causes Cancer’, which was successful in creating awareness but had no discernible effect in terms of changing consumption behaviours. Nor was it followed by advice to consumers about how to cope with the risk or concrete policy measures to food processors (Ferreira, 2006). In a different example, the British government’s decision to suppress information about the risks to human health of mad cow (BSE) disease was linked to fears of alarmist media coverage and the impact it could have on agricultural production (see Murphy-Lawless, 2004).

In the United Kingdom, mad cow and foot and mouth disease serve as powerful examples of how such crisis situations trigger wider public debate and distrust about food production and supply chain practices, in turn shaping how future food issues are communicated and understood. Freidberg (2004) highlights the strategic work of non-government organisations (NGOs) in capitalising on the fallout created by these disease outbreaks to push supermarkets to respond to their concerns about the ethics of food production. In particular, she looked at the ‘media work’ involved in three NGO campaigns for ethical food supply chains with respect to their overall strategies for gaining voice, legitimacy, and influence. Among the study’s conclusions was that particular NGOs, together with popular media, “participate in the ethical complex that drives British supermarkets’ ongoing efforts to demonstrate socially responsible supply-chain governance” (p. 528). Freidberg notes that the willingness of supermarkets to engage and work with NGOs is shaped by whether or not the NGO has an established and positive profile and media coverage is an important determinant of this. NGOs compete with one another for attention and, as is the case with industry and other groups, many employ people whose job it is to monitor, attract and manage media in accordance with their organisation’s interests. Freidberg also identified a preoccupation with the media among food exporters, importers and retailers. Further research into the kind of media work engaged in by NGOs, supermarkets and other interest groups could contribute valuable insight into the mediatisation of ethical and sustainable consumption (Eskjær, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008; see also Couldry, 2004).

News and current affairs programs in Australia have also been successful in exposing aspects of the food supply chain, capturing the attention of publics and, in turn, effecting policy change. A recent example was the 2011 Four Corners’ exposure of the live export of Australian cattle to Indonesia, which led to a suspension of the trade (see Tiplady, Walsh & Phillips, 2013). Widely picked up by other media, this story shone a light on food production practices, food trade and animal rights. It offers an example of the influential role media, in combination with interests groups (in this case Animals Australia and the RSPCA), can play, particularly on issues where people have little direct experience. The news value of this story was clearly high, aided by the availability of graphic imagery, and this perhaps suggests a problem with respect to communicating issues that are not easily conveyed through visuals.

As suggested, experts, industry bodies, consumer groups and activists interpret and seek to use sustainability in a variety of different ways and according to their own interests (Grove-White, 1996), and journalists and other intermediaries have a role in translating these claims. The positions taken by stakeholders on the issue of genetically modified organisms (GMO) is illustrative. Pro-GMO actors argue that it offers the key to sustainable solutions, while anti-GMO actors see it as running counter to sustainability principles (Van Gorp & van der Goot, 2012). The corporatisation of organics is another example where research shows that many of the themes of food democracy, such as the ‘eat local’ appeals, have been taken up and woven into the marketing discourse of the corporate-organic foodscape. While food democracy activists attempt to channel these themes through non-commodified programs, marketers produce similar narratives to sell their products. While the appropriation of food democracy themes in the marketing of corporate organics attests to the powerful social meanings of these themes (Johnston et al., 2009), it also raises questions about how citizen-consumers recognise these claims and where they turn for trusted information about the environmental and social impacts of food choices.
The significance of news and interest groups’ framing practices must be understood in relation to the socio-political context from which they emerge and into which they enter. It is here that the idea of food information environments is useful. Ferreira (2006) says food information environments comprise the sum of three discrete yet interrelated fields of inquiry: science, cuisine, and marketing. The knowledge produced within these fields filters through into news and popular media, advertising, and everyday food practices. It is critical to consider how food products are constructed in each of these domains and the impact they have on consumer perspectives of food safety, nutrition and sustainability issues. In the context of food-related risk studies, Ferreira (2006) says:

A focus on the environment of the food product addressed by the risk message rather than on the risk message alone may give some insights on the processes of selection and translation by the media. (p. 856)

Food information environments are saturated by media and, as such, claims about the unsustainability of existing consumption patterns and production methods have to compete for consumers’ attention with a variety of other messages that may be more appealing or of more immediate interest. The massive proliferation of television cooking programs, celebrity chefs, and reality-style programs appears to reflect a renewed interest in and problematisation and fetishisation of food, cooking and eating in western capitalist societies. Television programs such as *Kill It, Cook It, Eat It* and *Gourmet Farmer*, for example, have a strong focus on informing people about the food production process from paddock to plate in a manner that may encourage people to think more about food sustainability. Popular programs such as *Masterchef* and *The Biggest Loser* deal with food, cooking and eating in very different ways. They are linked to commercial interests and seek to encourage people to shop at particular supermarkets or purchase certain products, and this shapes how viewers respond to them (Caraher, Lange & Dixon, 2000).

Added to this are the numerous social marketing campaigns directed at changing people’s dietary behaviours. Prominent examples of government initiatives include: ‘Swap it don’t stop it’ (http://swapit.gov.au), spurred by concerns about growing rates of obesity; ‘Go for 2 & 5’ (http://www.gofor2and5.com.au), encouraging increasing consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables; and ‘Love food hate waste’ (http://www.lovefoodhatewaste.nsw.gov.au), focusing on the environmental and economic cost of unnecessary food waste by citizens. The ways in which these cultural products impact people’s knowledge and behaviours needs further empirical investigation. What is the role of popular culture and advertising with respect to ideas of 'environmental citizenship' and 'green consumerism'?  

**Conclusion**

Food related issues touch so many areas of life, from the wellbeing of individual bodies to the integrity of ecological systems, that claims and counterclaims abound (Blue, 2010). This adds richness and complexity to how food issues are conceptualised in research, represented in the media, and understood among various publics. This paper has offered suggestions about where more research is needed to uncover the role of media, in combination with other social actors, in shaping citizen-consumer views and practices around food sustainability. Conceptually, focusing on narratives that are constructed about food and how they reflect or obscure the social and environmental conditions and impacts of food production, distribution and consumption may produce valuable insights (see Freudberg, 2003). How media discourse on food policy issues has changed over time, the frames and media-oriented practices of interest groups and, importantly, the ways in which food sustainability finds meaning in the lives of individuals living in different socio-cultural contexts, are key areas of inquiry.

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#Democracy
Towards a Conceptual Framework for an Empirical Study of Political Conversations on Twitter

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**Abstract**
This paper seeks to establish a set of concepts to help frame an empirical analysis of the relationship between internet communication technologies and political discourses. It discusses theoretical and methodological issues relating to established frameworks for investigating the role that these technologies play in politics. Specifically, it attempts to problematise notions of the internet as an extension of the public sphere, which we argue underestimate the role that individual users play in the co-construction of meaning. Additionally, we suggest, there are unresolved conceptual issues relating to the epistemological and ontological relationship between ‘online’ democracy and the ‘offline’ physical and social institutions through which democracy is enacted traditionally. We use the micro-blogging service Twitter to illustrate a series of methodological steps that, we argue, could facilitate an empirical investigation of internet-mediated conversation.

**Keywords:** social media; democracy; digital dualism; Twitter

**Introduction**
In this article we question some of the assumptions inherent in popular claims about internet technologies and their role in contemporary political processes. Of course, this is familiar ground for techno-political theorists, and there is nothing particularly novel about questioning the presumptive relationship between internet technologies and democracy. Many authors have articulated concerns that internet technologies may not be the promised democratic panacea (Gladwell, 2010; Hindeman, 2010; Morozov, 2011). However, we hope to contribute to this on-going debate in a small way by laying the foundations of a conceptual framework that will eventually enable a close empirical reading of internet-enabled action. There is an increasingly urgent need for such empirical work because internet technologies are being granted an increasingly central role in policymaking.

Academic discussions involving internet technologies and politics tend to take one of two approaches. On the one hand, there are scholars interested in the internet’s potential for expanding and improving the day-to-day functionality of political actors and institutions. On the other, there are scholars whose interest in techno-politics tends to focus on specific periods of political and social protest. The different types of interest are summarised by Farrell, who also notes:
The broad literature on these questions has tended, until quite recently, to polemics rather than substance. It has gathered information not to test hypotheses, but either to provide rhetorical support for grand, sweeping arguments or to bludgeon rival arguments into non-existence. (Farrell, 2012, p. 1)

At one end of the spectrum, Tim O’Reilly invokes his own concept of Web 2.0 to explain just what Government 2.0 and government as platform might mean:

Government 2.0 is not a new kind of government; it is government stripped down to its core, rediscovered and reimagined as if for the first time … [it] is the use of technology – especially the collaborative technologies at the heart of Web 2.0 – to better solve collective problems at a city, state, national, and international level. (O’Reilly, 2010, p. 14)

Key to this vision is the idea that technology enables government to become participatory, a term that is much debated in the political sciences (e.g. Ekman & Annå, 2012). O’Reilly’s technology-driven solution to the “collective problems” in government is not without its critics, notably Evgeny Morozov (2013), who vigorously and enthusiastically denounces the “enduring emptiness” of the debate. Nevertheless, there are plenty more academic authors who see an increasingly significant role for internet technologies in expanding and improving democracy.

Internet Technologies and Democracy

According to the PEW Internet Project, 66% of social media users have used these platforms to post their thoughts on civic and political issues, engage in debate and encourage wider political activity among their contacts (Raine, Smith, Lehman Scholzman, Brady & Verba, 2012). Park (2013) finds that ‘opinion leadership’ on Twitter contributes to an individual’s involvement in the political process, but that simple use of Twitter does not necessarily help political engagement. Examining social media use during the 2008 US presidential election, Carlisle and Patton (2013) discover that political activity on Facebook is less prevalent than popular accounts might suggest. Indeed, Hindeman (2010) is quite dismissive of the internet’s potential to expand democracy, citing uneven access to internet technologies as one reason, while Jürgen Habermas thought that the internet would fragment the mass audience to a “huge number of isolated issue publics” (Habermas, 2006, p. 423).

Shirky (2011) has sought to describe how social media technologies “can strengthen civil society and the public sphere” (p. 5) in previously authoritarian states, while others see the rapid, uninhibited flow of information between citizens as a crucial factor in creating a politicised, protest-ready public (e.g. Tufekci, 2011). Starbird and Palen (2012) described how messages were disseminated via Twitter’s retweet mechanism during the 2011 protests in Cairo. They argue that the ability to retweet – to pass on another user’s message verbatim, or with comments – can encourage the widespread transmission, or contagion, of ‘memes’. When Twitter was heralded for its apparent role in supporting protests in Iran following disputed elections in 2009, one commentator wrote how the service “drove people around the world to pictures, videos, sound bites, and blogs in a true reality show of life, dreams, and death” (Pfeifle, 2009).

To date, then, there is little agreement that the internet delivers similar outcomes across political contexts and processes. This is unsurprising, perhaps, given that ‘the internet’ is a catch-all term for disparate technologies and behaviours. Uncertainty also remains as to how internet technologies might effect political outcomes. Farrell (2012) warns against seeking a ‘monocausal’ logic and instead suggests a search for different mechanisms “that might intervene between forms of communication such as the Internet, and final political outcomes” (p. 7). He suggests three possibilities. First, internet technologies may affect the cost of collective action, lowering communication costs and making it easier for political groups to recruit or to organise protests. Second, these technologies may make it easier for like-minded individuals to locate each other and cluster – a process he calls homophily. Third, they may affect individual propensity to disguise or falsify true political preferences, which may be significant in
authoritarian regimes especially (Farrell, 2012). While these different mechanisms may seem more or less probable, missing from the list is perhaps the most frequently assumed explanation for internet action on politics, namely that internet technologies can extend and invigorate the structural dynamics of the public sphere.

As Roberts (2009) articulates, the “argument about the democratising aspects of web participation revolves, explicitly or otherwise, around a set of assumptions about the nature of political communication and the functioning of what is often referred to as the ‘public sphere’”. The public sphere is the “intermediary system between state and society” (Habermas, 2006, p. 412), the structures that allow citizens to communicate and to debate with each other and with their central democratic institutions. For Habermas (2006), the normative function of the public sphere requires that those structures support deliberation: debate, leading to opinion formation, which is public and transparent; inclusive, offering equal opportunity for participation; and allowing “a justified presumption of reasonable outcomes” (p. 413). But, as Habermas also notes, in contemporary Western societies, the public sphere is “dominated by the kind of mediated communication that lacks the defining features of deliberation” (p. 414). In the remainder of the paper we are concerned with the effect that internet technologies may have on deliberative communication in the public sphere. We raise three issues that, we argue, complicate empirical studies of this mechanism in action. Then we suggest a tentative framework by which empirical accounts may be made more robust. Finally, we use the micro-blogging service Twitter to illustrate how our framework can be applied to specific cases of political deliberation.

The Networked Public Sphere

Internet technologies are now deeply enmeshed in the human social experience (Jurgenson, 2012b). The rise of the smartphone in techno-modern societies means that internet access tends towards ubiquity. Graham and Zook (2013) have described how physical spaces are increasingly constructed in concert with digital information, which is then layered on top of these spaces by technologies such as Google Maps, Wikipedia and customer-review sites. Personal and social lives are augmented by Facebook, Instagram and other networking services, as are modes of cultural and economic production. In short, internet technologies penetrate deeply and create a dense web of interaction both between the technologies themselves and between their users. Bruns, Burgess, Crawford and Shaw (2012) talk of a media ecology in which content moves between internet technologies, broadcast and print media. The density of this enmeshment makes empirical consideration of any one technology, or any one outcome, exceedingly difficult, both theoretically and methodologically. For instance, any general theory of how an internet technology affects the public sphere must be broadly applicable across different contexts but, time and again, observation of these technologies in action suggests that outcomes are highly context-specific.

In terms of designing and conducting empirical studies of these technologies – especially quantitative work – it is extremely difficult. first, to identify and control potential selection biases and, second, to mitigate the effect of potential confounders. It may be inappropriate to investigate ‘the internet’ as though it is a homogenous socio-communicative phenomenon, and better to focus on individual internet technologies – platforms like Facebook, services like email and so on. However, the unfortunate truth is that users do not limit themselves to just one platform or one service, and their involvement in the public sphere may be mediated by a whole range of interacting technologies. Indeed, it is likely that individuals who are especially active on Twitter, say, are more likely to maintain a Facebook network, write for Medium and so on. This creates confounding relationships within the media ecology that make it very difficult indeed to isolate one technology and consider its influence on something as complex and as nuanced as deliberative democracy. Additionally, of course, there are confounders external to specific media ecologies that equally complicate matters. Access to internet technologies may vary between groups in ways that mirror existing engagement with politics and deliberative political discussion (Hindeman, 2010). Educational and economic factors are likely to be particularly influential in this respect.
Social complexity and enmeshment are not unique to studies of internet technologies, of course. However, because internet technologies are particularly significant in terms of mediation, establishing the extent and effect of this enmeshment is important, and raises a second issue for the empiricist. Nathan Jurgenson (2012b) claims that atoms and bits – the physical and the digital – have become mutually constitutive; to speak of one as though it were separate from the other (either as a separate space, or a distinct reality) is a fallacy, one he calls digital dualism. Digital dualism is the idea that the internet exists in one place but not another, or that it constitutes a ‘reality’ distinct from our prevailing reality – what we might call the offline, physical or natural world. In Jurgenson’s own words: “Digital dualists believe that the digital world is ‘virtual’ and the physical world ‘real’” (Jurgenson, 2011). Instead, he wants: “to argue that the digital and physical are increasingly meshed, and … to call this opposite perspective thatimplodesthe atoms and bits rather than holding them conceptually separate augmented reality.”

One is unlikely to find many people holding the view that the digital (virtual) and physical spaces are wholly separate realities, which do not interact. It is similarly rare to find people who consider them indistinguishable. Rather the key distinction (which causes our confusion when thinking and writing about the internet) is between two “mild” positions:

Mild Digital Dualism: The digital and physical are different realities, have different properties, and do interact.

Mild Augmented Reality: The digital and physical are part of one reality, have different properties, and interact. (Jurgenson, 2012a)

Internet technologies may augment a single, physical state of being, or people may perceive a difference between their digital and physical experiences (Carr, 2013). Jurgenson’s mild augmented reality position, in which the digital and the physical states are different because each has properties that define it as different, appears to recognise this. The implications for empirical studies of internet technologies should be clear. If the digital and the physical constitute a seamless whole then perhaps deliberative discussion in the digital space is translatable to our normative models of ‘physical’ democracy. However, if there are mediated differences in the perception of these states, how appropriate is it to assume a normative relationship between digital deliberation and physical democracy?

The third and final issue for the empiricist is the role that the individual citizen plays in the deliberative process. To measure deliberation by the spread of a single tweet, or to count the likes beneath a Facebook post, is to assume that each retweet, each like, means something roughly similar to all users. Yet communication theory recognises that competing, disjunctive and coterminous discourses come together in the experience, the mind and the actions of individuals. The meaning making process is interactive – different individuals do not necessarily create meaning from the same text in the same way (Lewis, 2000, 2005). How should an empirical approach best account for individual complexity and subjectivity?

In order to address these challenges, we propose that any empirical research must satisfy the following criteria. First, it must permit some sort of comparison between media ecologies that is non context-specific. Second it must allow for the uncertain epistemological and ontological relationships between the ‘online’ and ‘offline’ worlds. Third, it must account for individual interaction between the communication technology and its users. As such, we require that our research approach allows for variation in the nature and the outcome of individual meaning making events. We do not want to impose any assumption of structural logic on individual users, and we are not interested in metrics or analytics that describe the overarching technology but tell us nothing about how individual users experience and interact with it. This means that we reject social network approaches, diffusion models and general descriptive measures (total tweet numbers, for instance, or follower accession curves).

Clearly these criteria are not easily satisfied. The solution we propose involves seeking properties of individual communication technologies that might be reasonably said to be inherent to the technology, and to affect meaning-making relevant to the socio-political sphere. Here, we are adopting Jurgenson’s notion...
of properties, which he uses to differentiate the respective digital and physical states, ahead of the oft-used affordances (e.g. Wellman et al., 2003). We use the concept of properties rather than the affordances specifically because we want to suggest that different technologies have characteristics that are independent of their interaction with humans. These properties will not necessarily determine that interaction, but they will – to some extent – help shape it. The digital and physical states, to the extent that they exist independently, arise from the communication technologies employed to mediate human-social experience. Any phenomenological difference, then, arises from differences in the properties of the techno-mediation process. As such, by focussing on the properties of the communication technology, we may be able to make empirical comparisons that are less context-specific and tell us something about any complex online/offline dualism.

Towards an Empirical Method

The assumed structural logic of the internet is that individual users are connected in horizontal networks, in which any two users (or nodes) can share information. Communication within networks becomes a function of the network structure, as messages spread between nodes. Social and computer scientists increasingly invoke epidemiology in order to explain the spread of messages in these networks (e.g. Tufekci, 2011). The appropriation of epidemiological terms – viral (virality, virals), contagion and so on – adds to an assumed epidemiological explanation for transmission patterns on the internet. This is something of a misrepresentation of epidemiology, which is concerned principally with the distribution of diseases within populations, rather than the distribution of the populations within which a disease may spread. Of course, the dynamics of the population – structure, movement – may well affect the distribution of any given transmissible disease, but rarely will it explain that disease in full; some reference to pathology is normally required, or to the specific transmission dynamics involved (Anderson & May, 1979). Otherwise all diseases would spread exactly the same way within any given population. In short, for an epidemiological analogy to be useful to us, it needs to move beyond assuming that connection equals transmission equals disease.

What we are actually interested in, of course, is not diseases but the distribution of meanings within a population or, more specifically, the distribution of different political opinions held by participants in a deliberative public sphere. When considering what properties might be suitable for empirical comparison, then, we require measures that may reasonably be thought to act on the ‘mechanics’ of the meaning-making processes that affect these distributions. Furthermore, while individual measures may be technology-specific, we require that the properties being measured refer to attributes shared by all communication technologies. In other words, if a property is to be usefully measured, it must be measurable across different forms of mediated conversation, it must apply to both the ‘online’ and ‘offline’ realms, and there must be a clear, reasonable mechanism (psychological, sociological, biological) by which it affects meaning-making.

The type of computer-enabled, electronic communication technologies discussed here are, to a great extent, features of late age modernity. The networking protocols necessary for distributed computer connections arose from the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) in the 1960s; HTML and the world wide web were only invented in the early 1990s; social media tools are barely 10 years old (Leiner et al., 2009). As such, these technologies are central features of the globalisation processes that characterise late-age modernity. This expansion and intensification of experience in modern, hyper-connected societies has prompted theorists to posit an age of space-time compression (e.g. Castells, 2010; Harvey, 1990). It seems reasonable that, if there are fundamental differences in online communication systems, then these differences arise from the disruption of the temporal and spatial properties of those technologies. According to Knorr Cetina (2009): “When interactions migrate online, for example, the interacting parties meet in time rather than in a place; for that reason, response presence becomes important, and temporal rules of coordination begin to matter” (p. 79).
For Robert Hassan, there is a fundamental disconnect between the rhythms of internet-enabled communication and the rhythms inherent to processes associated with the institutions of liberal democracy. According to Hassan those processes date back beyond the Enlightenment, and are based on older technologies, mostly associated with the written word, which cannot keep pace with the accelerated temporality of online communication (Hassan, 2012). Modern democratic institutions were born during an age of printed communication and are necessarily structured according to the temporal rhythms defined by the properties of that technology. Thus the properties of writing are constitutive with the properties of democracy. If the speed at which internet technologies operate is incompatible with these slower rhythms, then perhaps, rather than being enhanced, liberal democracy is disrupted in an age defined by rapid internet-based participatory media.

**Time, Space and Twitter**

In the final part of this paper, then, we use the micro-blogging service Twitter to illustrate how the temporal properties of a technology may be used to establish an empirical framework for describing that technology. Twitter is a social networking technology that allows users to publish highly structured, short-form messages, limited in length to 140 characters. Messages are displayed via a public platform where, by default, all tweets are visible to anyone who connects to the service, regardless of whether or not they are registered with Twitter. After creating an account, an individual user chooses to follow other users, which means that all messages from those users are aggregated and displayed via a timeline – effectively a live stream of messages that updates whenever a new message is published. Twitter users employ a specific lexicon to organise and direct their messages and to add functionality to the service. This lexicon includes the retweet (RT), the @ reply and the hashtag (#), which is used to identify a message as part of a broader conversation/topic discussion. When the service celebrated its sixth birthday in 2012, 140 million users were posting 340 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2012).

To demonstrate how an empirical investigation of the temporal properties of Twitter can provide useful material for a discussion of deliberative potential in the public sphere, we observed Twitter activity during a series of live broadcasts of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) political discussion program Q&A in the run up to the 2013 federal election. During each show, we captured tweets from Twitter’s streaming application programming interface (API) containing the keyword ‘#qanda’, which is the hashtag promoted by the ABC to curate a program-relevant discussion. Some of those tweets are selected by Q&A moderators (and an algorithm) and appear on the television screen during the broadcast. During one show, the 19 August edition, which featured a debate between the incumbent Labour treasurer Chris Bowen and the Liberal shadow treasurer Joe Hockey, we downloaded 24,930 ‘#qanda’ tweets from the API. For each tweet, several data points are available, including the Twitter identity of the sender (and any intended receivers), the full text of the tweet and a timestamp, which corresponds to the second the tweet was published on the platform.

It is interesting to note that in our sample 1% of users were responsible for 10% of tweets, and the most tweets that any one user sent during the hour-long broadcast was 82. So while Twitter may offer equal opportunity for participation, the ‘#qanda’ tweet stream is dominated by relatively few voices. However, for the moment, we are interested in whether we can describe the temporal properties of Twitter, so we are principally concerned with the timestamp values. To limit the number of values we have to deal with, and to simplify the deliberative outcomes, we extracted tweets that were sent during a five-minute period during the show (5:41-10:22, see Figure 1) when Bowen and Hockey were debating the ‘surplus obsession’.

In that five-minute period, 2,024 tweets were published. That suggests that an average tweet remains at the top of the ‘#qanda’ stream for little more than a tenth of a second. Given that many tweets published in this time did not reference the deficit debate – in a coded analysis only 42% of tweets engaged fully with the subject – then any given tweet (indeed, any collection of tweets) is going to have negligible effect on a deliberative discussion, unless some sort of selection and display mechanism is available. Clearly, this
A cursory overview of a somewhat artificial case study is limited, not least by the technical and practical uncertainties involved in capturing tweets from the streaming API. It is intended simply to illustrate the ease with which the temporal parameters of Twitter conversation can be explored, and to introduce the sort of questions that our conceptual framework raises for Twitter temporality. Additionally, it illustrates the inadequacy of assuming that simply sending a tweet equals transmission and reception of meaning. This is a rapid, intense, highly discursive meaning-making space. Contagion models that rely on automated identification of ‘connection’, or message exchange, risk reductive assumptions about complex mechanisms for meaning-making. The volume and rate of message flow poses acute conceptual challenges for any assumption of rational, deliberative communication.

Figure 1 – Chart showing the number of ‘#qanda’ tweets captured from the streaming API during the hour-long broadcast of Q&A on 19 August 2013. The area shaded pink corresponds to the ‘surplus obsession’ discussion.

Discussion

We have argued that an empirical investigation of deliberative political discussion on Twitter needs to address three issues. First, it must identify characteristics of that discussion that are non context-specific; second, it must account for perceived digital dualism; third, it must inform the mechanisms by which meaning is made on Twitter. To satisfy these criteria, we suggest an approach that focuses on the temporal dynamics of Twitter discussion, making use of the timestamps available for all tweets collected through the Twitter streaming API. Space-time compression is widely considered a feature of the internet, and of modernity more widely. Furthermore, there is a theoretical precedent for considering the effect of time on socio-political discourses. We have demonstrated that it is straightforward to collect timestamps for tweets related to a political discussion, and to use simple measures of publication rate to discuss the suitability of Twitter for deliberative debate. Beyond these tentative, introductory steps, however, can the timestamp measure be used to develop more sophisticated empirical approaches?

In the first instance, it raises questions about how appropriate it is to use the Twitter hashtag (e.g. #qanda) to define a community of users, or a ‘public’. This approach is fairly common in analyses of Twitter activity. It makes sense if the hashtag is used relatively rarely but, in our example, the rate at which new tweets were published suggests that it would be inappropriate to assume any causative correlation between message, reception and meaning. Additionally, while collating hashtags via the API makes it relatively easy to collect topic-relevant tweets, it does not tell us anything about how users (individuals or groups) are receiving or responding to those tweets. One solution to this, of course, is to concentrate only on retweet or @ reply conversations, ignoring all tweets that fail to illicit a response from other Twitter users.

We would argue, though, that even this approach, without close reference to tweet content, ignores a great deal of the complexity involved in meaning-making in this space. It might be better, then, to use the rate
of tweet publication as a measure of discussion density (i.e. the rate of tweets published per minute or per second), on the basis of which more sophisticated analysis can be conducted. For instance, close reading techniques, such as thematic coding or discourse analysis, could be combined with density measures to investigate how meaning-making responds to the speed of tweet publication.

The discussion presented here is brief and intended, primarily, to raise questions. How are political conversations distributed on Twitter in terms of tweet publication rates? Are there systematic differences between rates and content? Can we use language tool kits to explore these differences? What is clear, however, is that any individual engaging with Twitter will be interacting with dense and rapid communication flows. Measuring the rate of those flows, and the intensity of individual interaction with them, is an important first step towards better understanding Twitter’s capacity for deliberative discussion.

References


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FireWatch
Community Engagement and the Communication of Bushfire Information

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Abstract
Successive bushfire inquiries in Australia have called for authorities to more effectively harness and disseminate bushfire information. Recommendations from these inquiries suggest a new approach to bushfires involving greater co-ordination, in which home dwellers, emergency fire services and government work more closely together and acknowledge that education, safety, planning and emergency management can be effective responses to the threat of bushfire. Policymakers and community members are seeking to revise bushfire protocols and access new sources of authoritative information, which may help guide public responses. Nonetheless, the effective communication of information regarding bushfires still seems to be problematic (Department of Justice, 2013).

This paper reports on findings from an ARC-funded research project, titled Using Community Engagement and Enhanced Visual Information to Promote FireWatch Satellite Communications as a Support for Collaborative Decision-Making. The project investigated the fire information communications environment of remote Australia in order to develop a suitable, user-friendly bushfire information website. Using a ‘communicative ecologies’ framework, this paper analyses findings from interviews held in 2012 and 2013 with community members living in the remote area of Kununurra, Western Australia. Interviewees described a fragile ‘communicative ecology’ where the coverage or reach of different communications technologies is variable, and where there are reception and compatibility problems. They also expressed disappointment and frustration about the lack of fire information in times of bushfire – as well as a lack of operational transparency and effective community engagement on the part of emergency organisations.

Keywords: FireWatch; bushfire communications; communicative ecology; satellite remote sensing; community engagement

Introduction
This paper discusses qualitative findings from an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project, titled Using Community Engagement and Enhanced Visual Information to Promote FireWatch Satellite Communications as a Support for Collaborative Decision-Making. The project is concerned with the redevelopment of FireWatch – an existing mapping website which provides near real-time satellite information about current fires, and other fire related information such as lightning strikes, fire scar areas, vegetation coverage, vegetation greenness, topographic information and weather information – to a more publicly accessible, or user-friendly, website. The FireWatch service is produced by Landgate, a government statutory authority in Western Australia (WA). The current site is dense with layers of highly technical information primarily for the use of fire and emergency services experts. The redevelopment of this product will reduce the heavy cognitive burden manifest in the existing site, making the site more
navigable and accessible. It will extend the usability of the product from experts to everyday users in order to facilitate community-based decision-making and action both before and during bushfire emergencies.

The two main research questions this project poses are: how can FireWatch be integrated into communities as part of a holistic fire awareness program, and how can FireWatch be redesigned to incorporate global best practice and modern principles of dynamic information design to develop a more intuitive version for ordinary users? In order to answer these questions the project has two complementary strands: the first (Community Strand) involves gathering information about remote community communication ecology in relation to fire communications to resolve whether the user-friendly FireWatch site would be a ‘good fit’ with the existing communications ecology; the second (Design Strand) involves utilising design best practice to produce an overall interface which is easily navigable, user-friendly and incorporates the most relevant information data in times of fire stress (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Screen grab of the user-friendly FireWatch prototype

This paper is concerned with the Community Strand of the project and uses Altheide’s (1994, 1995) notion of an ‘ecology of communication’ as a framework to analyse the fire information needs of remote Australian communities and whether or not the new FireWatch site ‘fits’ these needs. Our analysis of the communication ecology of Kununurra and its surrounds indicates that the user-friendly FireWatch project will add to existing communication channels already used in times of fire stress – and ensure that local community members are kept effectively in the fire communications loop. Ultimately, the new user-friendly FireWatch site will inform the public about the size, scope and movement of large fire fronts that travel across large tracts of land in northern Australia. It will also provide the public with fire scar, weather, greenness and lightning strike information.

Community Engagement and Bushfire Preparedness and Reaction

Greater community participation in bushfire communications is a key recommendation of the multiple inquiries into bushfire disasters. Fire and emergency services organisations are under some pressure to accommodate this perceived need. Internet-based communications have a key role to play in filling the
gap, but must balance community desire for participation with government requirements to be reliable and minimise risk (e.g. Freeman & Freeman, 2010). The increasing use of social media during disaster events (Bird, Ling & Haynes, 2012; Keim & Noji, 2011) reflects the fact that, in the absence of official platforms, or sometimes even despite them, citizens will create their own unofficial channels to communicate. “If a government/official emergency services authority is not found to be communicating with the community online, or not communicating adequately, citizens will tend to create their own unofficial channels to distribute information about an emergency or crisis” (Quinn, 2012, p. 4).

An analysis of six Commonwealth and state inquiries (before 2008) found that there were serious concerns with “the way in which fire agencies deliver information to community members during a bushfire” (Elsworth, Stevens, Gilbert, Goodman & Rhodes, 2008, p. 8). In addition to this, the need for fire agencies to implement systems “that enable community members to communicate information to fire agencies, making use of local knowledge” (Elsworth et al., 2008, p. 8) was stressed. Since this 2008 analysis, further bushfire inquiries have continued to stress that communications concerning bushfire information need to be improved. The Royal Commission into the Black Saturday bushfires, in which 73 people lost their lives in regional Victoria, included “numerous references to community involvement and greater co-ordination between government agencies and between authorities and home dwellers” (Brady & Webb, 2013, p. 5). Three Western Australian bushfire inquiries, about bushfires that occurred in 2011, all identified fire communication as wanting. One of these, the parliamentary inquiry into the Kimberly Ultramarathon fire, identified many communication failures between the local community and race organisers, as well as between emergency services attending to the burn victims (Economics and Industry Standing Committee, 2012). The inquiries into the 2011 Perth Hills and 2011 Margaret River bushfires also focussed on organisational communications issues – both with planning and emergency responses (Keelty, 2011, 2012).

Within the scope of bushfire preparedness and response in Australia, community engagement involves a wide-ranging assembly of community interaction exercises, including:

- Media campaigns raising awareness of the risk of bushfire in areas prone to bushfire and warnings advising about fire danger conditions or specific warnings about approaching fires;
- Printed literature aimed at increasing householders’ knowledge about “making a decision to stay and defend or leave early, possible preparedness activities and what to expect during a fire” (Gilbert, 2007, p. 5);
- Interactive publications involving websites and/or DVDs which replicate similar content available in print, local brigade activity such as displays and presentations including school-based education activities; and
- Street and community meetings including those with a preparedness emphasis usually held in the build-up to the fire season, those that brief community members during a bushfire incident or post-fire meetings which occur soon after a bushfire event. (Gilbert, 2007)

These community engagement activities are important sources of information for fire preparation and information. Many inquiries have recommended that more timely and reliable fire information is needed, especially in times of crisis. Developments – technological and social – over the last decade have resulted in the general public no longer relying on a single-source of official information in times of crisis (Sorensen & Sorensen, 2007). Social network technologies are now being used by the media and the general public to provide timely information during bushfire events, and social network technologies are also being used by emergency authorities as another channel through which to push bushfire information. To date, however, emergency agencies have been slow to “source information posted by in situ residents, in order to help in decision-making” (Freeman as cited in Holloway, Green, & Brady, 2013) and are yet to “harness social media and use it as a reliable source of information and intelligence” (NSW Rural Fire Service spokesman Anthony Clark as cited in Griffith, 2013).
Nonetheless, in the case of remote Australia, where the population is sparse and where internet connectivity is often limited to townships, pastoral homesteads and some remote Indigenous communities, and 3G access is limited to towns only, the use of social media to capture and harness timely fire information is somewhat constrained. Access to the internet is available to more than 70% of remote Australians. This access forms part of a mixed-mode online/offline communications ecology reliability. Landlines, mobile telephones, satellite telephones, long and short range radios and the internet all combine to facilitate and enhance community communications, especially in times of emergency. In addition, organisational use of multiple communication channels and platforms to inform citizens about bushfire emergencies ensures a greater degree of coverage – in case of specific communication systems breakdowns or difficulties – as in the telephone alert system breakdown in Kelmcott-Roleystone, WA, or a recent fire in Warrnambool, Victoria, which took out the regional telephone exchange, making telephone calls, mobiles, landlines and the internet non-operational (Johnson, 2012).

The timely delivery of fire information will support the public in their decision-making regarding their responses to a fire emergency. The user-friendly FireWatch site will provide an additional layer of information (for rural and remote Australians) who often rely on visual sightings and on word-of-mouth to be informed about fires in their region. This service will also provide fire information for remote media services (especially local radio) to relay fire information and warnings to people living in rural and remote Australia.

**Research Methods: Community Phase**

The overall aim of the project is to redesign and repurpose FireWatch for use by ordinary users and to engage a remote community in northern Western Australia in that process. Using a social shaping of technology perspective (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 2003), we consider community members to be part of an active audience, and that this active audience makes choices about when and how they access information and what they do with it. In this sense, context and relevance is just as important as the quality and usability of an information product such as the new user-friendly FireWatch site.

**Fieldwork Locale**

The town of Kununurra was chosen as the fieldwork site because the user-friendly FireWatch site is being developed specifically for remote and regional users. Kununurra was chosen for its remoteness as it is located in the north east of the Kimberley region in Western Australia and is about 40 kilometres from the border with the Northern Territory. It was also chosen because of its size and proximity to community groups including emergency groups such as St John’s Ambulance and Kununurra Volunteer Fire and Rescue Services, service groups such as Apex and Lions and the Country Women’s Association – as well as a variety of sporting groups. Kununurra also has a variety of land uses including pastoral, mining, national parks and reserves, as well as horticultural lands fed by the Ord River Irrigation Scheme.

**Participants**

In order to consult with a variety of stakeholders within the community of Kununurra, purposive sampling was employed as a recruitment strategy (Patton, 1990). Interviews with 42 stakeholders were conducted in Kununurra (2012/2013) to determine fire-related information-seeking behaviours and attitudes to mediated information services in the region, as well as user feedback on a prototype website developed in the design strand of the project. Stakeholders included emergency services personnel (paid and volunteer), shire representatives, tourism operators, small business operators (including tourism operators), a forest manager, a mango farmer, an Indigenous ranger team manager, residents on very remote pastoral properties, visiting tourists and general community members.
Data Collection

Open-ended and semi-structured, conversational interviews were used in this phase of the project. This style of interviewing is a combination of unstructured and structured interview techniques. While unstructured interviews (those without particular questions) tend to reveal a broad range of information that can be difficult to analyse, structured interviews (such as those in a face-to-face survey) may not elicit sufficiently useful information because the right questions may not have been asked. Thus, the semi-structured interview provides the researcher and interviewee some degree of direction while, at the same time, empowering the interviewee to pursue their own agendas – other topics or issues of concern that are related to fire prevention and mitigation (Holloway & Green, 2013).

Data Analysis

The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The transcriptions were then read, analysed and emergent themes identified. An initial reading of the data showed heightened interest in the new user-friendly FireWatch site: “It's very much, very easy to follow” (David, 2012); “It looks so much better than [the old site]. You couldn’t get in that close on [the other site]. It is fantastic” (Bill, 2012). Further analysis of the data revealed a number of more subtle themes also relevant to the aims of this project – about how formal and informal communication flows regarding fire information are configured in the region.

The Fire Information Communicative Ecology in Kununurra

Altheide (1994, 1995) first developed the idea of ‘an ecology of communication’ to address the variations in technology access that reflect a person’s social circle, personal competencies and available/affordable technological resources. From the importance paid to context it is clear that, at the individual level, not all ecologies of communication are equal, even in the same household, although the social element means that people's ecologies of communication are influenced and informed by their neighbours. Hearn and Foth (2007) posit that such communicative ecologies have three layers: a technological layer; a social layer – the links between the communicating people; and a discursive layer – the content of the communication. “This more holistic model helps us better understand the dynamic interrelationships between different communication technologies and between different social dimensions” (Foth & Hearn, 2007, p. 751) and can be used at either macro or micro levels of analysis (Hearn & Foth, 2007).

Communicative ecology is used as a framework within which to describe and analyse the community phase of this project, which aims to determine whether or not, and how, the new FireWatch site will ‘fit’ into the existing communications ecology of the area. In this analysis we extend the existing work of Hearn and Foth (2007) to analyse the technological layer (form and function of communication technologies), and the social layer (how groups network and organise) to determine how the new user-friendly FireWatch site will fit into the existing communications ecologies of remote Australia.

Communicative Ecology: Technological Layer

This section analyses the accessibility and reliability of devices and connecting media (Hearn & Foth, 2007) that assist in the communication of fire mitigation and suppression information within the Kununurra area.

Fragility of the Communications Environment

People in the area of Kununurra report on the fragility of their communicative ecology and the importance of a ‘back-up plan’ for every eventuality. These remote residents fully understand that the use of multiple channels and platforms of communication helps to overcome communications breakdowns in times of emergency. They already have a relatively complex technical communication ecology which involves
different technologies being used ‘in town’ such as landlines, mobile phones and the internet – and satellite phones, long range radios and short range radios being used outside the town zone. Newer technologies such as satellite phones, mobile phones, digital radios and internet communications are displacing (but not completely replacing) older communication technologies.

Last year there was flooding and our fibre-optic cable got cut. There goes your internet and [...] and cell phones. About a month ago we had the same thing happen – they were excavating in the street and cut the cable, so for three days there were no cell phones or land lines. We relied on radios and satellite phones. In an emergency what is the chance of that happening again? Without cell phones and mobile phones you have to rely on satellite phones which are unreliable. (Dieter, 2012)

Last resort technologies, such as satellite phones, can also be problematic:

Satellite phone goes off all the time. Our microwave phones [radio phones relayed by a series of microwave towers] go off all the time. ... [Also, there’s] the time taken to get the phone out, find a satellite – if you are in a gully, down below where the fire was a month ago – it didn’t work at all. (Jan, 2012)

Despite the many communication channels available, the communication ecology of the Kununurra area is relatively fragile. Interviewees also report that: compatibility between different satellite phone networks is problematic; mobile phone coverage can be sketchy with relatively good coverage in the middle of town becoming sporadic to non-existent the further away from the town centre they get; the internet only works in town, on pastoral stations and within some small communities; and the long range radio towers do not cover all of the Kimberley area. In addition to this, all these technologies do not work if used in a bad location – behind a ridge or in a deep valley – or in the case of internet connectivity in town, if there is heavy cloud coverage in the wet season.

Access to the Internet

Information about access to existing communication technologies are a critical precursor in the development of an information product such as the user-friendly FireWatch site. The town area has 3G access and has an ADSL2+ exchange. Kununurra will be receiving fibre-optic broadband cables as part of the National Broadband Network (NBN) (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2012). Internet access is also available to people living on pastoral stations and in some small communities. Despite the remoteness of the township, interviewees in this study surprised researchers with their levels of ownership of internet connected devices. While 80% of homes in Kununurra are internet-connected (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013), we found that internet-connected community members do not always use fixed broadband links, preferring to use the 3G network to connect to the internet. This finding is a reminder to researchers and designers that existing data regarding internet usage around Australia does not, at this stage, include users of 3G and 4G enabled mobile networks. As a response to this finding the new FireWatch site or app will be now be available on touchscreen tablets and smartphones.

Informal Information Flows

Informal Information Flows

Often overlooked in an analysis of emergency communications are the local, informal communications that form part of local emergency response efforts. Local pilot Lenard describes how his air charter business puts him in a position to be able to warn relevant authorities about fires in the area:

We’ve got a national park on the eastern side. If a fire threatens the eastern boundary of that it is more than likely going to move into the park. They [Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC)] are required to do something about that. They don’t necessarily know
about it. We see the smoke ... when you are up in the air you tend to see things – not from a
paid observer’s point of view but just as a casual ... oh look there is smoke there. We can see
stuff everywhere. I’ll call DEC and say – did you know you have a fire out there. Or if there
is one sprung up – and it is not the tip burning off or something like that – I’ll ring the shire
and say we’ve got a fire there. At this time of the year you know it could potentially be a
problem. (Lenard, 2013)

These informal information flows also occur between community members during “the critical period
before emergency service responders can appear on site. In this situation, it is often local knowledge that
underpins improvised grassroots communication networks that inform and organise the neighbourhood”
(Holloway et al., 2013). For example, during a bushfire on a peri-rural block on the periphery of
Kununurra late in 2012, a group of neighbours went into action in the critical period before emergency
services could respond. One neighbour describes how telephones, two-way radios and quad bikes were
used to alert and organise the neighbourhood during a fire on the outskirts of Kununurra:

We phoned around and someone would phone and call in. Instead of 000 being rung ten
times, make sure that one person rang it in. 40 channel [CB Radio] was handy – two-way
communication, four wheelers – knocking on doors making sure everyone is out of the house,
just in case. (Jane, 2012)

Informal Information Flows

Interviewees gave an indication of the challenges and frustrations felt in the face of information silos,
where organisations seem incapable of reciprocal communications with each other. This tends to result in
inadequate or disjointed communications particularly during times of fire stress. Neighbours and
emergency workers want and need to work together. However, the priority has been placed on creating
secure communication channels within each emergency agency. Silo-to-silo communications is made
particularly difficult through the use of secure communication channels tailored for each emergency
agency. Emergency worker Samuel describes the difficulties he has when trying to contact other
emergency workers during a fire emergency:

I can only talk to my people on that. I’ve got no access to other services. [... there’s also] the
range of your antenna. I can talk to Lake Argyle which is about 70kms from here, and I can
speak to the [my] office here and to the hospital, but if a policeman is standing next to me
he’ll be able to contact the police station, but the two of us won’t be able to talk to each other,
because we are all on different channels. [... It would make a difference] if we could get a
common emergency channel. Everybody is digital now, and it is safer, more confidential, so
a common channel. (Samuel, 2012)

In response to these interoperability difficulties, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES)
is rolling out the WA Emergency Radio Network (WAERN), a state-wide radio network aimed at
facilitating direct interoperability with other agencies. However, it is yet to be seen whether this system
will streamline communications between agencies or merely add another supervisory layer in times of
bushfire emergency.

Silo-to-public communications in the Kununurra area is also seen as problematic. When asked about fire
information delivery to the public during a peri-urban fire, George, a council worker and emergency
service volunteer, was himself not satisfied:

That is not very good at the moment. The only other way we can think about it is perhaps
more updates on things like Facebook, perhaps on a website, but with this current fire there
really wasn’t a lot of information and a lot of people didn’t know what was going on. We
[local council] knew because we were talking to the brigades and to FESA [Fire &
Emergency Services Authority of WA) but most residents didn’t have any idea and it looks pretty bad. (George, 2012)

Silo-to-public communications can also be a sensitive area, especially when the public question the actions of emergency agencies about bushfire events. Bulldozing contractor Georgia, whose equipment was used to make fire-breaks during a local fire, was reprimanded by one emergency agency after she spoke about it during a local fire forum:

I mentioned that casually, in a local fire forum, that this chap had scoffed at the idea of actually paying for fire suppression and that got back to the department and they came marching around with their bottom lips out, saying – you’ll have to say sorry about that. You shouldn’t be talking about things that happen during a fire afterwards to the locals. They got a bit precious about it. (Georgia, 2013)

One of the aims of this research project is to investigate ways in which remote and regional members of the public can be engaged and mobilised through the development of FireWatch to make it more accessible and usable, allowing a community-focused response to risk. Local residents in the Kununurra area voiced their concerns about formal information flows in times of emergency, and in between emergencies, and welcomed the idea of an information source independent of emergency services organisations.

Conclusion

One of the aims of this project is to research ways in which communities in remote and regional Australia can be engaged in the development and use of a user-friendly, public information website. Our exploration of the communications ecology of the Kununurra area shows that there is a greater range of communications technologies used in remote areas of Australia than in other areas. This range of communications devices is of major importance in areas where: the communications ecology is rather fragile; the coverage or reach of different communications technologies is variable; and there are reception and compatibility problems. The use of multiple communication channels and platforms of communications by organisations and the general public ensures a greater degree of coverage – in case of communication systems breakdowns or difficulties.

The analysis also highlighted community dissatisfaction with the delivery of timely fire information in times of bushfire, as well as a lack of operational transparency and effectual community engagement, on the part of DFES and to a lesser extent DEC. It is heartening to note that within DFES’s strategic plan document, New Beginnings 2024, DFES gives strategic priority to “community warnings and information” as well as a commitment “to being open and transparent with regard to decision making, accountability and governance” (DFES, 2012, p. 2).

In the sparsely populated north of Australia, where emergency organisations cover large areas prone to regular seasonal fires, there is clearly a role for the kind of fire information that can be provided by FireWatch. This is particularly relevant in remote areas where communication channels are often patchy or of poor quality making seamless communication difficult – and where people from outside the community, such as tourists, are exposed to risk during the dry season. Findings from this project indicate that the new user-friendly FireWatch site will be a welcome, and easy to use, information source for remote community members who currently feel under-informed about fires in their area.

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Public Connection with Local Government
Desires and Frustrations of Articulating Local Issues

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Abstract
This paper provides an empirical account of public participation within an Australian local government context. It seeks to determine the ways civic discourse is articulated and how (if at all) this facilitates civic connection with local government. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups with local citizens from the Victorian municipality of the City of Casey, this paper explores citizens’ understandings, experiences and expectations in relation to participation with local government. Citizens conveyed a strong desire for engagement, as well as frustration that the local government is disinterested in civic input and fails to keep the community adequately informed. Participants suggested that this situation is creating both a sense of disconnection from government and civic reluctance to further engage in local political matters. These civic insights reveal a precarious state of local politics, and highlight the complexities and tensions in the relationship between local governments, citizens and democratic participation.

Keywords: citizens; local government; public participation/engagement; (dis)connection with government

Introduction
This year saw the third attempt of a referendum to address whether local governments should be formally recognised in the Australian constitution. Such a move would enable local governments to access funding directly from the Commonwealth and may potentially alter accountability processes. While it was intended that the referendum coincide with the 2013 federal election, former Prime Minister Rudd’s chosen election date prevented this opportunity. Regardless, the issue has reinvigorated debate from various associations as well as local, state and federal members over the authority granted to Australian local governments. The move to alter the political powers of councils by incorporating them into the constitution should be approached with careful consideration of both current local government performance and the best interests of citizens. In this context, this paper seeks to highlight understandings of local government held by citizens, particularly in relation to public participation and the effectiveness of civic communication with local government.

There is a growing link between localism and civic engagement that recognises the value of local government settings for processes of public connection (Michels & De Graaf, 2010). As the majority of citizen interaction with government occurs locally, the communicative practices employed by councils offer key spaces for democratic participation (Shackleton, 2010; Couldry & Langer, 2005). In order to facilitate engagement, these spaces should involve government receptivity and responsiveness, with civic input afforded consideration in decision-making (Macnamara, 2013). This approach enables political participation to lead to action, which helps citizens develop a sense of connection with government (Coleman & Blumler, 2009).
This paper builds on an earlier study of local council communication (Freeman, 2013) to present empirical findings from focus groups and interviews conducted with residents of the City of Casey (Casey) municipality in Victoria. It explores a desire for enhanced civic participation but suggests there is also strong dissatisfaction with current local government operations. A common view amongst participants was that Casey is unreceptive and unresponsive towards civic views and is out of touch with the community. This situation contributes to community frustration towards ineffective government communication practices, with concern that public participation methods do not inform government actions and decisions. Highlighting the importance that citizens place on community issues, this examination of civic views aids understanding into local public life (Craig, 2004), and results in a proposed model for effective local government communication. While this paper does not intend to suggest that Casey provides a reflection of all Australian local governments and their constituents, the understandings, experiences and expectations of local citizens highlight a variety of complexities and tensions surrounding democratic participation at the local government level.

Public Participation and Local Government

The traditionally passive role of citizens in representative forms of democracy is under question, with community involvement and active citizenship gaining prominence in political discourse (Marinetto, 2003; Scott, Redmond & Russell, 2012). Citizenship itself is an evolving and contested concept that broadly encompasses rights and responsibilities surrounding political, civil, economic, cultural and social life (see Miller, 2007; Dewey, 1946; Craig, 2004), and which shape individuals’ ability to participate in society. While these aspects of citizenship are deeply interwoven (Miller, 2007), this paper focuses on its political dimensions in relation to civic participation with government.

Public participation with government typically involves individuals occupying roles as consumers or citizens. Livingstone and Lunt (2007) distinguish between these terms, and suggest that ‘consumer’ is indicative of participation that involves individual private benefits, whereas ‘citizen’ relates to broader community benefits and public interest. These roles are, however, interrelated and both are important aspects of public participation with government. As consumers, individuals access government information and services, enabling them to formulate informed choices on political issues as well as utilise the services necessary to ensure quality of life. As citizens, individuals have the right to vote and have their interests represented by government. Private consumer interests and broader public and community concerns can be understood as two sides of the same coin (Livingstone & Lunt, 2007). Both are fundamental aspects of citizenship that contribute to connection with government, and neither role is more important. Interestingly, the term ‘citizen’ is regularly, although not consistently, used in Australian communications legislation to encompass both public and consumer interests (Australian Communications & Media Authority, 2010). Following this lead, this paper uses the term ‘citizen’ in its broader sense, as participants identified themselves as both consumers of local government information and services, and as citizens with the right to vote and voice opinions on community matters.

A body of Australian and international research informs this study. Pratchett (1999) argues that it is the responsibility of local governments to enhance democratic consciousness and facilitate improved methods of public participation (see also O’Toole, 2009). Couldey and Langer’s (2005) study of public connection demonstrates that citizens perceive democratic participation to exist primarily at the local level. In Australia, the majority (up to 80%) of citizen contact with government occurs through local government (Shackleton, 2010). These and other studies of democratic participation highlight a growing link between localism and civic engagement. In particular, local level participation helps to overcome some of the scale and manageability issues associated with larger-scale democratic involvement (Jimenez, Mossberger & Wu, 2012), and can help maximise local developments to suit specific civic needs (Bradford, 2008). Common understandings and experiences of local communities frequently drive participation efforts (Graham & Aurigi, 1997). The increased sense of immediacy and familiarity with local issues encourages active involvement because citizens can see the direct implications and relevance of political participation.
for their everyday lives (Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2009). Malina (1999) highlights the importance of local settings for political participation and notes:

Whilst there is an awareness that the ordinary person is unlikely to maintain interest in all political discussions, it is expected that people will be concerned about processes that affect their own lives. Citizens, therefore, should be enabled to exert some power and control over events at the local level. (p. 31)

The proximity of issues is therefore important for political participation. As Malina (1999) recognised, local participation – where citizens play an active part in the political decision-making affecting their everyday lives – requires citizens to hold a degree of power to exert influence. The engagement mechanisms enabled by local governments therefore retain a vital position in processes of public connection, as the provision of participatory opportunities is needed to facilitate active citizen engagement with government (Coul dry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007).

Public involvement with democratic processes must, however, have an impact if citizens are to feel a genuine sense of connection with government (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). There are often significant political barriers to engagement (see, for example, Chadwick, 2011; Freeman, 2013). In order for public participation to be meaningful and matter, Macnamara (2013) argues that the architecture to facilitate involvement needs to be designed into communication processes so that attention and consideration is afforded to public voices. In place of simplistic and tokenistic communicative practices, institutions ought to provide participatory opportunities that offer receptivity and responsiveness so that public involvement may lead to action and change (Macnamara, 2013; see also Jensen, 2009; Freeman & Quirke, 2013).

In their empirical study of public engagement, Coul dry, Livingstone and Markham (2007) highlight a lack of local spaces where citizens’ voices can be articulated into action. Coul dry et al. (2007) suggest governments should undertake practical steps to take fuller account of the role of citizens in political processes, including how citizens’ experiences and views are considered in decision-making. There is a need, therefore, for local governments to create and support spaces for civic participation. However, Wiklund (2005) highlights that municipalities have shown little interest in finding out the types of participative mechanisms citizens want, for what purpose, and how these facilitate civic involvement in democratic decision-making, and calls for greater investigation into citizens’ needs and preferences.

Empirical research on citizens’ views of public participation with local government has been undertaken in other countries (see, for example, Lowndes, Pratchett & Stoker, 2001; Scott, Russell & Redmond, 2007; Michels & De Graaf, 2010). These and other studies highlight that citizens often perceive local spaces for participation as tokenistic attempts to placate the community (Scott et al., 2007), with few opportunities and little capacity to influence decision-making (Jensen, 2009; Leach & Pratchett, 2005). In relation to public connection with local government, Coleman and Blumler (2009) conducted a survey of 2,273 citizens in the United Kingdom to assess how well citizens thought they were represented, and found that 77% felt a significant disconnection from local councillors. An emerging theme in this field of research is that of a widespread disconnection between citizens and local governments, caused largely by a lack of receptive and responsive engagement opportunities. In the Australian context, there are no formal requirements for local governments to enhance engagement with citizens or facilitate democratic renewal as there are in other countries such as the United Kingdom (see Lowndes et al., 2001). Aulich (2009) highlights that, despite an increasing focus on civic engagement in Australian local government policies, there are few instances where civic participatory practices have been established and “accepted as a fundamental right of communities to enable them to assume a formal place in governance” (p. 57).

This paper builds upon an earlier project that investigated Casey councillors’ perceptions of public participation (Freeman, 2013). It found that councillors had limited and divergent understandings of the role of citizens in democratic processes, that possibilities of increased civic involvement created a perception of risk in relation to political futures, and that political machinations significantly impacted upon both the engagement mechanisms offered to citizens and decision-making. Moreover, councillors
viewed citizens as largely uninformed and too emotional to make rational decisions, with civic participation unlikely to influence local decision-making (Freeman, 2013). By exploring the views and everyday experiences of local citizens of the City of Casey, this research adds another dimension to understandings of public participation at the local government level, and highlights underlying complexities and tensions that surround democratic involvement in local government decision-making.

Methodology

This research draws on a case study of the City of Casey to explore citizens’ perspectives of local political participation. Casey spans over 400 square kilometres in Melbourne’s south-east. Proclaimed in 1994, it is an amalgamation of two previous local governments that approximately covered Casey’s northern (urban) and southern (rural) regions. With a population of over 250,000, Casey is Australia’s seventh largest local government (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2012). The area is a designated growth corridor for metropolitan Melbourne and has experienced rapid expansion, with a 42.7% population increase between 2001 and 2011 (ABS, 2013). Drew (2013) indicates that the formation of larger municipalities through Australian local government reforms has created increasing emphasis on improving the efficiency of government operations, rather than ensuring their effectiveness. This has produced a stronger governmental focus on viewing the public as consumers rather than citizens (Drew, 2013), which means local governments like Casey often privilege one-way communication and service delivery practices over the development of two-way civic participation mechanisms.

It was a deliberate purpose of the research to elucidate the understandings and experiences of engaged citizens. Entman and Herbst (2001) argue that active citizens are vital to any democracy and, if research intends to explore the role and impact of civic participation on political decision-making, then examination of such ‘activated publics’ is necessary (see also Grunig, 1989). As such, individuals (over the age of 18) who had previously contacted the local government were recruited through local newspaper advertisements. People wanting to participate contacted the researcher directly, indicating they are active citizens in terms of using local news sources, having an interest in local government, and through previous experience contacting Casey. Snowball sampling was also used to build on the initial sample, with participants suggesting other community members who had contact with Casey and might be interested. This was a necessary extension for recruitment as participants noted that local newspaper availability has reduced and distribution dramatically fluctuates throughout the municipal area. To reduce any feelings of pressure, participants (rather than the researcher) initially contacted additional people. Participants were given a small honorarium for involvement; however, this was not advertised in any recruitment material.

Semi-structured focus groups and interviews (ranging between 90 minutes and two hours) were held in 2013 with 20 Casey residents to uncover their experiences and expectations, as well as the issues they deem important (Gamson, 1992; McCallum, 2010, 2006). There were also four participants from neighbouring municipalities who previously dealt with Casey on matters where Casey retains responsibility. The involvement of these citizens highlighted that overlapping communities face common concerns. In one instance, municipal divisions occur down the main road of a rural township, which meant that close neighbours in one focus group faced the same issues but had separate processes governing them.

For a small sample, there was a broad range of participants. These included: residents from both urban and rural areas; individuals aged in their mid 20s to early 70s; people who had recently (within the past couple of years) moved to the area during Casey’s growth; and many who had lived in the municipality for decades (one participant has resided in the area for more than 50 years). There was also diversity in the levels of political involvement undertaken by participants, which ranged from political activists to people who had minimal contact with the government in relation to minor service issues. Overall, the majority of participants had lived in the area for at least a decade and had ongoing concerns surrounding community issues, particularly in relation to municipal development. This sample meant that participants possessed considerable knowledge about the municipality, its communities, and the local government. Their experiences highlight a variety of issues faced within the municipality’s distinct geographical regions, as
well as changes that have occurred since Casey’s amalgamation. Thematic analysis of the interview and focus group data was used to identify recurring areas of importance for citizens.

The focus group and interview data was not intended to reflect local public opinion as a whole, but to offer a basis for greater understanding into citizens’ perspectives on and relationships with local government (see Lowndes et al., 2001). The narratives arising through local community peer conversations aid understanding into public life and participation with local government, allowing citizens’ understandings and experiences to reveal a complexity of issues that impact on local public engagement. Unexpected outcomes of the sessions included how appreciative participants were for having someone listen to their concerns, and the number of participants who wanted to be informed of the research outcome. These highlight two key themes that resonated through each session: the importance of local governments both listening to and informing the community (see Macnamara, 2013; Couldry & Dreher, 2007).

The Local Matters: Public Perceptions of Local Government

This section outlines key findings arising from the empirical data surrounding citizens’ experiences, understandings and expectations when contacting the local government. Interestingly, participants identified themselves as both citizens and consumers. In their civic roles, all interviewees demonstrated strong concern about how the local government should “benefit the community”, and desire to voice opinions on public interest matters such as community safety and support for marginalised groups. From the consumer perspective, adequate provision of infrastructure and services as well as value for money in relation to the government’s use of rates revenue were recurring issues raised by participants in each session. Overall, participants indicated that they used a broad range of participatory mechanisms to contact Casey, including direct in-person and telephone contact with the government and councillors, written submissions, and internet communication (website, email, discussion boards). This section focuses on the outcomes achieved from these communication processes.

Neglected Communities

We’re not important, this little area. We do feel our area is neglected. (Interviewee)

Local issues matter to citizens. Participants asserted that Casey has “lost touch with the people” and what is important to the local community. Many interviewees reflected upon this situation and suggested that, since Casey’s amalgamation, the council’s management of the municipality has become “much worse”, with poor civic representation: “when it was the Shire of Cranbourne, we had so many councillors that there were lots that you could actually contact that represented you”. Prior to the amalgamation, it was local people who represented local areas. Since that time, many now felt they lived in “neglected” communities. In large part, this was due to a sense that the City of Casey does not adequately understand local (especially rural) areas and issues, particularly as its staff “don’t actually live anywhere near the City of Casey” and “obviously never come here”. There was strong concern that Casey “has to realise the decisions it makes impact on people’s lives”. To address this predicament, participants called for a new sense of connection between the government and its citizens, and indicated that the “council must respond to the broader community need”.

The bulk of citizens’ comments predominantly concerned ongoing and unresolved issues, with trepidation that “there’s so much to do that nothing’s done”. In general, participants’ comments were positive regarding minor service issues promptly dealt with by council officers (such as replacing damaged rubbish bins) and Casey’s financial support of community groups and organisations. However, negative comments far outweighed the positives on matters that had a higher degree of difficulty or involved individuals directly dealing with councillors. Citizens perceived a distinct lack of interest in issues raised by individuals, with many matters put “in the too hard basket”. Most concerns related to insufficient services,
infrastructure, and poor planning to cope with Casey’s rapid growth. In particular, participants were concerned that the government needs greater foresight in its initiatives and developments, highlighting that on many occasions the necessary infrastructure is not in place before larger populations move into the area: “we’ve got to accept progress to a point, but make sure you put the infrastructure in”. In this regard, there were calls for greater coordination with authorities overlapping Casey, including the Victorian state government and Melbourne Water, in order to more effectively improve and service the local area.

Several participants indicated that Casey is more like a corporation now rather than a council, and that an administration would be more effective than the current local government. It was suggested that there is poor communication between Casey’s departments, and staffing improvements are needed as frequent turnover makes it difficult for citizens to develop an ongoing rapport with the government. Participants noted that poor job satisfaction – among councillors, officers, and senior administrators – influenced levels of conscientiousness and compassion when dealing with the public. In particular, it was “the ones up the top [who] don’t care”. This comment, amongst others, suggests that there is a significant disconnection between citizens and those people in government who hold greater power.

Participants indicated that there was “one rule for them and one for us”, with numerous suggestions that councillors only represent their own interests, rather than the community’s, using the system to their own benefit. Examples included that councillors obtained their role in order to keep its contacts, and that local money is used to fund international trips for issues that are state government responsibility. Another example involved residents from a rural township who applied for minor works funding from Casey to improve a local recreation reserve and tourist site, for which they completed all the work. In this instance, the local representative took the credit in his re-election campaign material, promoting these developments as improvements he had secured and completed for the community.

Local Government and Its Relationship with Citizens

They treat you like you’re an idiot. They’re right, I’m wrong. I’m a fool. That’s the tone of everything you get from our council. (Interviewee)

Participants frequently spoke about the elitist mentality of the government and councillors, highlighting a significant lack of respect for citizens who directly contact Casey. There were numerous comments in this area, and examples include: “They’ve all got this, sort of, holier than thou attitude”; “They think they’re above you”; “They have got a superior attitude”; and “She just wasn’t even respectful and I wasn’t even doing it [contacting Casey] for me”. A significant disconnection has occurred between the citizens and government, which was noted both in relation to individual issues and broader community matters where involvement was undertaken on behalf of local groups and associations. Furthermore, citizens felt the government “take you for a fool”, was “just brushing me off”, that it was “rude”, and “it’s just absolute rubbish the way they treat you”. There was little to suggest that citizens perceived the government was making any genuine attempt to connect with local citizens.

All participants agreed that the local government was not keeping citizens adequately informed on issues or the reasons for decisions. Even on small matters, such as maintenance issues, citizens were not informed in advance about the government’s actions: “nobody knew anything about it”; “it would have been nice if we had of known. We heard about it after it had occurred”; “they don’t keep us informed on anything”. It was also felt that citizens were not offered feedback on the way issues were progressing or how (if at all) their input had been considered. Comments in this area indicated that the government was deliberately not fully informing or misleading citizens on local issues by only putting forward positives and not covering any of the negatives: “you’re not even being given the correct information for you to make your decision on”. Citizens suggested that the government “try to keep it [current issues] really quiet” and “try to tell you as little as possible”.

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There were many comments relating to inadequate information on council use of rates revenue. All participants felt they are not told enough specifics in the budget breakdown, instead provided with general summarised data that appears meaningless. Cost and value for money were significant concerns of local citizens, with participants recognising themselves both as consumers of government services and contributors towards local government funding through their rates. Participants suggested there is a need for better decision-making in relation to government use of funds. They indicated that the government’s lack of familiarity with the local area is contributing both to civic suggestions and complaints not being understood, and excessive use of costly consultants who develop plans that are never adopted or are inappropriate for the area. Several participants mentioned the government’s poor choices surrounding use of money, noting that much was “wasted”. For example, one participant highlighted that, with a $15,000 grant to plant trees on a local reserve, it cost $755 per planted tree (for tubing stock, not established trees). But these trees were planted at the wrong time of year, and many subsequently died. Worth noting is that citizens were not opposed to paying rates; they just wanted to be kept better informed to ensure they were getting value for money.

Several participants highlighted inconsistency in decision-making. They questioned why decisions were made when they appeared to contradict the majority view, and said there was no information given to justify decisions: “Even if it’s a majority of people going along saying we don’t want it, they will say, ‘Oh bad luck’.” One citizen spoke of a petition she organised with 97 signatories. The council told her it would not be taken into consideration as many of the signatories did not live in close enough proximity to the proposed development, despite being Casey residents. This citizen highlighted that these local residents were still funding the development through their rates. Even after involvement at a council meeting, the citizen received no response in relation to the issue or the reason for the council’s decision.

Involvement with Casey through formal processes was perceived to be limited by the government. For example, planning permit applications were deemed to take an overly long time before Casey reached a decision and informed applicants of the outcome. Minor works applications could only be lodged online; participants noted that this was difficult both due to poor internet connectivity and as they were unable to gain any assistance from Casey. Participation at council meetings is also understood as restricted, as Casey’s public question time policy is to keep questions (and answers) as brief as possible with no discussion permitted (see City of Casey, 2013). Questions can be ruled out of order if their introductions comprise more than ten words, and individuals cannot submit more than two questions at a meeting (City of Casey, 2013). Such strict limitations on public questions restrict any likely influence of this form of civic participation.

The Impact of Local Public Participation

Bang your head against a brick wall. They don’t care about what you say. (Interviewee)

Participants were asked how they thought the local government received their views and what type of response they attained. Typical comments included: “they don’t listen to you”, “you can say something, but it’s not going to go anywhere”; and “you don’t get a response”. A concerning fact was that many quotes in this area appeared verbatim in multiple session transcripts. For example, the phrase “they don’t care” appeared in every transcript and often from multiple sources in each. Many citizens highlighted that they never received return contact, and when it was received it was often in the form of pre-printed letters that failed to address the issue raised. Interestingly, citizens indicated that they would prefer no response than such a letter. Similarly, one participant noted that when using an online discussion board (that is outsourced by the local government), “it’s all one-way” and the only government responses you might receive are generic “we’ve received your reply” comments. These observations highlight the efficiency versus effectiveness debate outlined earlier, and suggest that if the government is to make an effort to provide spaces for civic participation and return contact, then it must be meaningful to be effective.
Citizens felt that the council “don’t really want us to have a say or an opinion”, and that Casey holds very negative perceptions of people willing to speak up. Citizens indicated they were resented by the government and perceived as “whingers”. Fears of judgment and backlash were mentioned in multiple sessions. For example, one participant highlighted the hostility faced from councillors who begrudge citizens: “if a couple of councillors don’t like someone, just a normal local person that’s trying to get something ... I know they have definitely gone against that person [because they’ve got a personal vendetta]. This situation is inhibiting civic desire to be involved even though citizens may feel strongly about particular issues. It was pointed out that this situation is “emotionally draining on the person” trying to have their say. Moreover, it was suggested that the government aims to wear down citizens: “You just get tired. So they know they’ll railroad you in the end”.

In addition to the government being unreceptive and unresponsive towards civic input and not keeping the community informed, participants highlighted that civic views have little to no impact on government actions or decisions, confirming the views of councillors in the previous study (Freeman, 2013). Following instances where citizens had directly contacted the government, participants emphasised that “they’ve already made their mind up, how they’re going to go”, “it’s not going to change”, “you’re not going to get anywhere”, and “you’re never going to have an impact”. Moreover, citizens identified that even official channels for public involvement, such as public question time at council meetings, were tokenistic: “It’s just a token – they have to allow you in and then they just vote how they were going to anyway”. Participants also highlighted a lack of accountability of the local government’s operations: “They will just do what they want”; “Nobody pulls them up on it”. This is a disappointing situation for the local citizens who indicated the amount of effort and reflection that is involved when contacting the government. For example, written submissions are often drafted and re-drafted over a period of several days. This demonstrates that the local government matters to citizens, particularly due to the immediate impact on the quality of their everyday lives: “We’re impacted by it more than they [the government] are”. Again, citizens highlighted that Casey’s failure to fully consider the impacts of developments on residents is largely due to the fact that staff live outside the area. These comments offer evidence that emotional attachment to local community issues encourages participation (Pantti & van Zoonen, 2006). Contrary to local councillors’ views (Freeman, 2013), this does not mean that civic involvement is irrational or illogical. Indeed, it is unrealistic to expect that local governments themselves possess all the necessary municipal knowledge to make well-informed decisions, and civic input could provide a useful source of further information (Michels & De Graaf, 2010). Overall, citizens indicated that, despite wanting to engage, they currently have no role in local government, and representatives did little to represent the community’s interests. In order to improve, the local government has to “listen to the local people”.

**Citizens’ Recommendations for Developing Local Civic Engagement**

I should have the right to have my say, I should have the right to be heard, and I should have the right not to be dismissed; treated with some consideration and respect. (Interviewee)

The experiences highlighted here indicate that the local government’s communication with citizens needs to improve, as do methods of public participation; these were suggestions directly stated by many participants. To achieve this, this paper proposes three areas to work within: informing, listening, and acting. According to the local citizens, the government needs to listen to civic concerns both in relation to minor service issues and larger problems, and be proactive in seeking civic views on issues; act upon issues in a timely manner and consider citizens’ views in local decision-making; and provide detailed information to citizens on current issues, the decisions made, the reasoning for the decisions, and the way civic input is used in the process. Based on the empirical findings of this research, Figure 1 has been developed to illustrate a potential model of effective communication. It highlights that this is not a linear process but needs to reflect and support ongoing political conversations, rather than episodes of civic involvement (see Coleman & Blumler, 2009).
While there are numerous complexities and challenges for governments to develop such a process of public engagement, participants recommended several obvious starting points that would be relatively straightforward to implement and could considerably improve public connection with local government. The strategies for better engagement that were directly put forth by the local citizens included:

- Maintain focus on local issues and what matters to the community.
- Send out more information – both prior to and after matters are dealt with – particularly on use of financial resources. This could be done through, for example, detailed newsletters on current issues;
- Make a regular monthly time where councillors or officers will be available in local community centres or public halls in townships, particularly in the southern areas that are distanced from the official council offices.
- Offer more community meetings, and run opinion polls, surveys or questionnaires on key issues (particularly in relation to planning and development), and be responsive to civic feedback.
- Hold civic panels or focus groups, such as the ones undertaken for this research, to gain a better understanding of citizens’ perspectives on local issues and why they are important.

The implementation of these types of practices is of course contingent upon the local government to develop its communicative architecture so that it facilitates greater contexts for civic participation (see Macnamara, 2013; Couldry et al., 2007; Freeman & Quirke, 2013). Such small steps have been undertaken and proven to be of benefit in other local government areas. Participants’ comments regarding neighbouring municipalities of Greater Dandenong, Cardinia and Frankston highlighted awareness of greater efforts made by these councils to engage with their communities. For example: Dandenong has innovated through a mobile service application that can be used to report municipal issues; Cardinia conducts surveys and polls on proposed developments; and Frankston produces an extensive local newspaper sent out six times per year that covers topics including budget use, relations with other authorities, governance issues, and neighbourhood news. While the benefits and outcomes of these types of engagement practices vary, they broadly illustrate a greater commitment from the local governments towards keeping the public informed and enabling civic input.

There is currently an unmet civic desire for political engagement within the City of Casey. If local governments like Casey refrain from offering receptive and responsive communicative practices, there is potential for a democratic slip in relation to public participation. The citizens interviewed were not apathetic to local politics, but the negative perceptions of citizens held by the government and its councillors are inhibiting civic desire to be involved with the government on local issues. It was concerning that participants in multiple sessions mentioned that Casey’s failure to adequately communicate with citizens and utilise civic input is leading to political disengagement amongst the local community, which they were “disheartened” about: “[It is] not so much [that the community is] apathetic but they think, oh, what can I do?”; “the perceptions of a lot of the residents is there’s no point because they’re not going to listen to you in any case. People are genuinely cheesed off”. While these citizens are
actively concerned about local issues, often they deliberately do not engage with the government as they cannot see the point when their voices are not heard or considered in decision-making. Although these frustrations are leading to disengagement, this should not be equated with political apathy. Instead, they illustrate a need for the local government to provide improved contexts for civic involvement, or otherwise run the risk of exacerbating civic disconnection and dissatisfaction with local government.

Conclusion

Effective representation requires an ongoing connection between citizens and governments. Citizens will disengage from politics if they feel they are not recognised, heard or valued through this connection (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Macnamara, 2013). The evidence presented here indicates a need for more receptive and responsive communicative practices by the government, as well as civic desire to be kept adequately informed and have public feedback considered in decision-making. Public interaction with government must have an impact if citizens are to develop a genuine sense of connection with government (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). This necessitates political institutions keeping in touch with those they govern by providing contexts for public participation that take into account citizens’ experiences and views (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Macnamara, 2013; Hale, Musso & Weare, 1999).

The citizen-centric approach of this research highlights the value of examining civic perspectives in order to fully understand and appreciate the complexities and tensions associated with democratic participation. The evidence presented here highlights an unmet civic desire for political engagement, and adds to understandings regarding why people feel detached from and poorly represented by local government. At present, citizens are remaining interested in local issues, but the inadequacies of the political system are creating a genuine sense of disconnection from government. This situation produces significant uncertainty surrounding how long citizens will persist trying to engage on local issues, when there are concerning levels of cynicism and disappointment with the current form of local government representation of the community’s best interests.

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