

AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITIES MOVING ONLINE

Introduction

This paper outlines some of the themes that can be seen as Australian communities attain a critical mass of connectivity. It describes what a few communities are choosing to do with their connectivity, how they have gone about it, and some of their early outcomes.

New ways of communicating and exchanging information online are transforming Australian communities. People are increasingly using the Internet as a primary tool for obtaining information, sending messages, completing commercial transactions with government and business and obtaining online educational and entertainment services.

Once online, it becomes easy to send a greeting to a friend overseas and to send off an assignment to school or university. A day home with a sick child can still be productive, since a day's work can be sent over a network. Paying bills, researching a holiday or commenting on a local planning proposal – the possibilities are endless. The tyranny of distance is lessening for rural, regional and traffic clogged city areas in Australia.

The Internet is also an important tool for community activities. It is being used to arrange neighbourhood gatherings, organise sporting events, petition local politicians, provide input to government consultation processes and join communities-of-interest online.

The potential for online technologies to facilitate social inclusion and local community development has been well recognised both in Australia and internationally.

High levels of connectivity can generate a wide variety of economic benefits for all sections of the community. Connectivity can reduce the cost of transactions and help make services more efficient. Businesses, community organisations and individuals can access wider or new markets and client groups, more diverse information and improved communications. Highly networked communities are finding that local social capital¹ and economic development work in tandem. As the technological and skill base grows, it provides support for local industries and a stimulus for developing new applications and services.

The Australian Government's 1999 [*Strategic Framework for the Information Society*](#) noted that:

“Perhaps the most exciting feature of this increased connectivity is its potential to act as a catalyst for greater social interaction and community participation. Online technologies can have a direct role in enhancing community well being. They can provide better links across the local community while at the same time enabling access to wider national and international resources. Existing social infrastructure – schools, hospitals, public libraries, local

¹ Social capital generally refers to the processes between people that establish networks, norms, social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit. It is created when people interact with each other in a range of formal and informal meeting places such as the home, the workplace, around the neighbourhood, within formal associations and online.

councils – can be strengthened. Online capacity can help to stimulate and reinvigorate both local communities and communities of interest.”²

What is a Smart Community?

In smart communities leaders and stakeholders form alliances and partnerships to develop innovative ways to add economic and social value using electronic networks and the Internet.

A smart community can be a city, a regional centre or a group of communities facing similar challenges. Geographically separated communities can also collaborate to form a smart community, particularly when they share a common culture or set of interests. A community of practice can form around individuals or groups that may be physically separate but become linked online through their shared professional, social, scientific or cultural interests and activities.

Typically, smart community strategies change the dynamics of growth in the community. They leverage existing social capital and knowledge to facilitate local innovation. As a critical mass of positive energy gains pace, the community becomes a more attractive and competitive location in which to live, invest, and carry on business. This is accomplished by using online technologies as a tool to strengthen and build connections between the many networks within the community. The total becomes much greater than the sum of the parts, as groups coalesce to solve problems. Over time, this open organic approach transforms the way individuals and organisations live, work, learn, shop and manage their affairs. Learning becomes a life style.

Building a smart community usually needs more than just one or two projects, and digital communications are often an essential element in integrating and facilitating multiple projects effectively. A smart community strategy and action plan links several related projects through:

- An overall goal and vision for the community;
- Economic and social objectives related to the community's needs and opportunities; and
- A plan for realising those objectives.

Smart community projects may be designed to provide new and improved online services and applications in such areas as:

- The administration and delivery of local government and community services to the public;
- Business and economic development;
- Tourism development;
- Access to information on local community activities and programs;
- Learning, training and education;
- Preservation of cultural heritage;
- Development of the arts; and

² A Strategic framework for the Information Economy
http://www.noie.gov.au/projects/framework/reports/dec98_strategy.htm (page 3)

- Eliminating unequal access by citizens to the Internet.

A useful reference for communities is the [Guide for Creating a Smart Community](#)³, published online by Industry Canada

Best practice for Smart Communities

The US Pew Internet & American Life Project examined how five cities in the US were using online technologies for economic and community development. The study [Cities Online: Urban Development and the Internet](#)⁴ identified the following best practices for cities seeking to use the Internet to transform their communities:

- **Encourage bottom-up initiatives** – successful programs tend to be driven by demand rather than pushed by technology;
- **Encourage catalysts** – nurture and support committed individuals in the community that act as catalysts;
- **Encourage public funding** – provide government funding for community technology;
- **Encourage ‘bridging’ among groups** – form coalitions between advocates of low-income groups and people from the ICT sector for community development;
- **Encourage experimentation** – try multiple approaches, learn from mistakes, tolerate ups and downs in programs, and even failure.

Australian communities are transforming themselves through their adoption of these best practices. They are working together to develop approaches and use new technologies in programs that best suit their needs. Cities, regions and remote areas alike are displaying a willingness to experiment, to learn and to change.

In February 2003 NOIE prepared a number of profiles on communities successfully engaging in the creation of smart or learning community practices. The following two sections are made up of seven of these profiles and a Smart Community Resources section which provides information references and resources about other smart communities in Australia and overseas.

Current and Future Challenges

The major challenge currently facing many communities in their transition to become smart communities is to take an integrated ‘whole-of-community’ approach to multiple ICT needs:

- **Access:** Infrastructure (adequate bandwidth capacity, and affordable and reliable Internet connections); computer hardware, other access devices and software and publicly provided Internet access
- **ICT Literacy:** Basic ICT information and training for the community to be confident users of both the technology (ie PCs etc) and the online content/applications/services (ie how to extract maximum value from their use)
- **Awareness:** Awareness of the benefits and uses of ICT (examples of practical household and community benefits and case studies of innovative use); the need to

³ http://smartcommunities.ic.gc.ca/documents/whatis_e.asp

⁴ Cities Online: Urban Development and the Internet - http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/pdfs/PIP_Cities_Online_Report.pdf

identify and promote the value of ICT for all users in relevant and appropriate economic and social terms and to focus on the transformative effects of ICT rather than on ICT itself

- **Integration:** Integration of ICT into the fabric of everyday life – into the functioning of communities and institutions; embedding technology into people’s lifestyles and into the lives of local communities
- **Support:** Technical and training support; and understanding of the supportive regulatory regime that engenders confidence and trust eg privacy, security issues, consumer rights
- **Applications and Content:** compelling online content and applications to motivate use and enable users to maximise the benefits from their use of ICT, such as enabling local (community) content development e.g. digital self-publishing.

Strategies, policies and initiatives that address these issues and develop sustainable communication networks to implement them will be most likely to meet community needs and encourage economic and social capital growth.

Broadband

Broadband technology has the potential to transform Australian communities and the ways in which all Australians work, rest and play. Access to broadband connections amplifies the range of benefits of going online through providing increased data transfer speeds, improved reliability and the convenience of an ‘always on’ connection. These features enable access to a wider variety of online content and applications to enrich the user experience.

As broadband technologies become more widespread in the corporate sector and in major public sectors such as health and education, communities will need enhanced telecommunications capacity to effectively communicate with these sectors. Only communities that have such capacity will be able to participate fully in innovative and sophisticated online health care, education, e-commerce and entertainment services.