

## Wangaratta - NETCo-op: A Cooperative Community Telco

See: [http://www.neon.net.au/netcoop\\_info](http://www.neon.net.au/netcoop_info)

Wangaratta is a town in the north east of Victoria and is becoming increasingly well known for its annual jazz festival.

### *Statistical overview*

In the 2001 Census there were three Statistical Local Areas covering Wangaratta.

Approximately 21 per cent of Wangaratta's population used the Internet at home and 31 per cent from any site during the Census

week, similar to regional Victoria in total. However,

levels of Internet use in Wangaratta were significantly lower than for Victoria in total. The population profiles of Wangaratta and Regional Victoria are similar.

Internet use in Wangaratta, 2001 Census			
	Total Population	Internet use	
		At home	From Any Site
	Population Online at home	Online Any site	
Wangaratta – Central	15,899	20%	29%
Wangaratta – North	4,320	24%	32%
Wangaratta - South	5,520	23%	33%
Wangaratta Total	25,739	21%	31%
Regional Victoria	1,275,366	23%	32%
Victoria	4,644,539	28%	38%

### *Background*

This profile shows the long-term staying power of a Victorian community-driven telecommunications project. NETCo-op is a community network and Internet Service Provider based in Wangaratta, Victoria. It services the north eastern part of that state, and provides an infrastructure for both a business and a community network.

NETCo-op has evolved to become Australia's first non-profit telecommunications cooperative. Their community development approach has integrated support for community content with support for small business and appropriate training. The aim is to deliver value for money to the community of the region with high level information and services, through a sustainable business model. Already this group is providing an array of services, including public Internet access, dial-up accounts, website hosting and design, domain name registration, hiring of equipment such as data projectors and digital cameras, and an e-commerce facility. NETCo-op is able to offer these at competitive rates and uses the proceeds to support additional community development activities.

### *Nearly a Decade's Development*

These services didn't arise overnight. Their rural location means NETCo-op faces costs and challenges several times those of an urban telecommunications service. The story of their progress illustrates the value of *Networking the Nation* funding to 'jump start' an information society infrastructure, making it possible for a regional area to participate and benefit.

NETCo-op began as the North East Telecentre (NETC), established in 1993 with a Department of Primary Industry and Energy grant to introduce online services to the area. Elements included training, public and local call access to the Internet, and website development. In 1999 the Telecentre became a cooperative in response to

business and community demand and usage for online services, requiring a corporately robust and inclusive structure.

A number of elements are already in place. A set of public Internet access points are open in Violet Town, King Valley and Wangaratta, with more to follow soon in Thoona, Glenrowan, Milawa, Everton, Stanley, Beechworth and Yarrawonga. These provide a comfortable community base and place for getting to know the Net or developing the skills to use it for business or education. Training is available through a partnership with Skills.net, the successful Victorian community-based program to provide affordable Internet training and access.

NETCo-op's executive officer recognises that local development needs advanced infrastructure, training and a participatory approach. By planning for top-end services but being willing to cater to smaller business and personal sites, applications and participation, NETCo-op is reaching for the best mix that is likely to fuel future online development in north eastern Victoria.

As the infrastructure matures, there will be a need for support beyond technical and business assistance. The Co-op members and community groups may become the active drivers of opportunities such as digital publishing, as local skills and online interactivity lead to greater interest and demand for documents and publicity. Several initiatives now underway indicate that the area may be on the brink of a 'critical mass' of users and skills. The [Landcare](#)<sup>1</sup> site currently being developed in association with NETCo-op has the potential to become a demonstration project for a scalable, interactive extranet that can bring communication and cost efficiencies to business and community groups alike.

### ***Bootstrapping Business***

Helping small business to get maximum benefits from information technology is an important aim for many community development projects. The online business directory has expanded to include hundreds of regional offerings, from abattoirs to stone masons, but taking the next step to full electronic commerce procurement and payment requires a focused strategy. As part of the Australian Government's Regional Assistance Program, NETCo-op is undertaking a project<sup>2</sup> to increase the awareness and use of sophisticated information and telecommunication by business in North Eastern Victoria. One longer term aim of the project is to increase employment in regional businesses. Steps along the way include auditing the skills needed to take advantage of new e-commerce possibilities, broadening the understanding of e-commerce practice and modelling the use of IT and training to develop examples of best practice.

NETCo-op has selected 40 businesses from various sectors to participate in the first pilot project. These businesses will be helped to attain specific goals, such as an IT plan for their business, assistance with skills acquisition, advice on technology selection and ongoing support and coaching over 12 months. All of these elements are necessary for small rural businesses to fully understand and seize the opportunities of new technologies.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.landcare.net.au](http://www.landcare.net.au)

<sup>2</sup> Grant administered by the Department of Transport and Regional Services.

### ***Distributed Digital Publishing***

Community content is encouraged and is gradually growing, as familiarity with the technology spreads across the region. For example, the [You Are Not Alone community site](#)<sup>3</sup> is aimed at young people who may be having difficulties or be feeling isolated. It features song lyrics, stories, artwork, photos, and video scripts, with clear potential for multi-media expansion and showcasing local skills. The [North Eastern Car Club site](#)<sup>4</sup> caters to a different audience, but is also a well developed site with its own mailing list, classifieds section, and extensive links. Clearly, there are possibilities for synergies that benefit the region both socially and economically.

There is now a paid Community Development Editor. The web site includes an open invitation for 'community reporters' to submit articles that others might want to read on local history, events, or general interest topics. There is also a useful guide on how to keep stories simple and interesting, with low-key hints on writing for the web. The editor coordinates the community correspondents, who will follow up leads, take digital photos, conduct interviews or help others to write them up. This creates a mentoring system, where skills can be leveraged in a loosely structured and non-threatening way. The approach draws on the Newcastle Community News, a multi media Internet magazine in the UK. The editor also plans to work with community reporters to generate discussion among local community members about local issues that affect them, via email discussion lists and other appropriate NETCo-op forums.

The people are at least as important as the technology in this digital community publishing project, but the technical underpinnings are also innovative. The system uses ZOPE [Z Object Publishing Environment], from [zope.org](#), an open source web application server. This is database driven and allows a distributed publishing environment. Thus, correspondents can publish from anywhere, and local communities can take responsibility for building tailored content. This was found to be more useful than placing individual servers throughout the region, as the servers required technical backup that was both expensive and time consuming.

The ZOPE system allows the emphasis and resources to go to the people and their value-adding contributions. Specialist packages are also being collaboratively developed with other community networks like [MENA](#)<sup>5</sup> in Maleny, rural SE Queensland, for SMEs to self manage their own online presence. This is seen as essential as pro-active ownership and affordability issues are addressed.

### ***The Co-op Alternative***

Building an infrastructure based on sophisticated open source software is part of NETCo-op's commitment to non-corporate solutions, while providing the potential for advanced electronic commerce applications. Jamieson compares the 'dot com' approach with NETCo-op's 'dot co-op' philosophy. Whereas the first is driven by proprietary products and services, and focused primarily on profit generation, the co-op paradigm emphasises shared ownership and control, open source technologies and sustainable community development. It recognises that information and communication patterns and processes are not neutral, but can be designed to either counter or reinforce economic, community, cultural and environmental development and divides.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.netc.net.au/yana>

<sup>4</sup> <http://necc.netc.net.au>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mena.org.au>

Documents about the project describe community networks as locally based, and driven by local people and interests. An underlying principle is that the network should help bring the community together to discuss issues and develop plans for opportunities. Likewise, training has a user focus, which targets sub-communities as sources of strength, diversity and imagination. A parallel assumption is that the business and community/cultural potential cannot be readily separated. In keeping with these assumptions, there is much information on the site about [NETCo-op](#), its technical infrastructure, and how it is managed. They actively seek involvement from local groups and people. The Community Benefits initiatives illustrate some of the incentives available within the co-op model.

These dual aspects of business and community are seen as entwined and mutually supportive. While not for profit, they are also not for loss, and thus are developing a business plan that will allow for sustainable leveraging of their value-adding services, both within the region and to other groups.

NetCo-op is managed by a Board of Directors and Executive Officer in a similar way to corporate structures. Anyone can join the Co-op (it is free to NETCo-op clients), but all applications are approved by the Board. Members are eligible for benefits such as an extra month dial-up for free, low cost office software, as well as the right to participate in the decision making of the Co-op.

Strong not-for-profit motives underpin NetCo-op, such as leaving assets for future generations, working to provide young people a future in their community, having a sense of pride in maintaining and improving assets, and valuing self-reliance. They cultivate collaborative work practices such as aggregating demand, forming alliances, profit sharing, community involvement, valuing trust relationships, and respecting local knowledge as a primary source of information

Andrew Cohill, the Director of one of the most connected communities in the world, the [Blacksburg Electronic Village](#)<sup>6</sup>, commented on the NET-Co-op:

“I am very impressed by what is on your Web site. Without exaggeration, I can say it has some of the most clearly and concisely expressed concepts that I have seen in any community context.”

### ***An Intelligent Network***

NETCo-op is already offering a phone access network that allows local ownership and control with full global connectivity. Their business plan balances costs with growth that will benefit their community of members. Current plans will expand their ISP services to a full suite of telecommunications services through a partnership with Comindico, a wholesaler and direct supplier of convergent communications solutions. This is being developed as part of a new Community Access Network through the Victorian government, and will be a ‘content aware’ network that gives priority to voice, video and critical data. This network is capable of fully replacing existing voice and data services in areas where copper based technologies are failing or not available at high speed services. Similar technologies are being applied in telecommunications co-operatives and other local regional businesses in the USA and Canada. Such solutions are now possible in Australia’s more competitive and open access regulatory environment for voice and data carriage. They have the potential to provide affordable broadband to the bush. This will become increasingly important as business,

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bev.net>

education, entertainment, health care and other government services become increasingly sophisticated and information intensive.

### *Future Activities*

One advantage of the cooperative model is that it facilitates collaboration and alignment with smaller organisations, perhaps leading to ‘cooperatives of cooperatives’. This approach combines local relationships with economies of scale.

NETCo-op has a number of pro-active partnerships with government, business community. These are all aimed at creating a solid regional information infrastructure and longer term social and economic sustainability. These include:

- [CORR \(Centre for Online Regional Research\)](http://corr.netco-op.net.au)<sup>7</sup> that will research beneficial online applications;
- A micro payment gateway (Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations);
- A Rural Information and Communication Support Officer (Australian Department of Transport and Regional Services) to work with 40 business mentors; and
- A proposal in partnership with the Australian Alpine Valleys Agribusiness Forum and La Trobe University for a regional online agribusiness gateway which will become a ‘virtual serviced office’ for industry groups and individual online traders.

A range of web based applications will service electronic citizenship for NETCo-op members. Members will have access to their own web-based office, entertainment and publishing, to conduct themselves as electronic citizens.

Under the guidance of its Board and Director Jamieson, NETCo-op has also established a number of fruitful partnerships with supportive organisations, including the Cooperative Federation of Victoria, [Community Teleservices Australia Inc](http://www.teleservices.net.au)<sup>8</sup>, (which represents National Telecentres and Rural Transaction Centres), and [SNAC \(the Victorian state wide community network peak body\)](http://www.snac.asn.au/)<sup>9</sup>. A number of researchers have also taken an interest in NETCo-op and are actively involved in their projects.

NETCo-op are well positioned to expand their user-base and facilitate regional communities of interest that can drive future advanced application research projects in areas such as health, education and agriculture.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://corr.netco-op.net.au>

<sup>8</sup> [www.teleservices.net.au](http://www.teleservices.net.au)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.snac.asn.au/>