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It's Time: Reimagining Universal Service for Digital Life

[Gerard Goggin](#) ^[1]

University of Sydney

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Abstract

This article provides a brief introduction to a timely set of papers critically discussing universal service in telecommunications and proposing policy option. This is a longstanding public policy issue, moving once more into the foreground in Australia. The article puts the papers into context, and argues for the need to reconnect universal service policy with fertile and productive research, policy, social and technology innovation in other areas. Finally, the paper argues for the urgent need to fundamentally reimagine universal service to achieve the still relevant goal of access for all to essential communications technology.

Introduction

Universal service, or the idea of providing a communications service to all, has been a much debated concept in telecommunications policy over the past 25 years, across the world. It has been especially significant in the Australian context.

Australia has been responsible for an innovative approach to universal service, following its definition in the 1991 *Telecommunications Act*, in which it was a threshold social policy to establish the transition to a fully competitive environment. A further innovation occurred with the 1997 amendments that saw accessibility for consumers with disabilities formally incorporated in the universal service obligation (USO). Finally, and most dramatically perhaps, is a development formally outside the universal service framework, but which has proven most consequential upon the concept: the establishment of the National Broadband Network, which has set the stage for a quantum leap in the effective level of the universal service – allowing citizens to expect a broadband service as a national entitlement.

Alongside these innovations in Australian universal service policy, we can place the many criticisms of the suitability, adequacy, efficiency, effectiveness, and fitness-for-purpose (in relation to aims of competition and functioning markets, as well as social and cultural purposes, and needs of consumers) of the now dated USO. For many years, criticism of the USO has been mounting from all quarters: industry, consumers, researchers, and policymakers. With the expectation that government will act soon to review and remake universal service policy, this set of four papers could not be published at a better time. In 2016, a year when various media and communications issues are on the table for deliberation by the Turnbull Coalition government, none is more important than universal service – and it deserves a much more rigorous, wider, comprehensive policy, academic, and public conversation than it has had for a long time.

The impetus for this dedicated public policy section of the *Australian Journal of Telecommunications and the Digital Economy* was the remarkable *Rethinking the Universal Service Obligation* event, organised by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), held in Sydney on Thursday 12 March 2015. Facilitated by Rosemary Sinclair (chair of the 2011-2012 Regional Telecommunications Review), this day-long workshop included a wide range of commentators and stakeholders. Amid strenuous debate, it generated a palpable sense of shared purpose.

Broadly, there was a consensus that:

- the current policy framework was outmoded;
- the fundamental uses, requirements, expectations, and desires of Australian consumers and users (be they individuals, households, business or institutional users) had moved far beyond fixed-line telephony to embrace Internet, social, and mobile media; and
- the dynamics of business, industry, economic activity and innovation were not adequately captured by the USO of yore.

For some present also, there was a stark confirmation of a ‘democratic deficit’, in various senses, between the pro-social possibilities of contemporary digital technology, and the political settlement of the 1991-2015 USO.

The four papers published here provide an invaluable guide to the state of play of these debates. Three of the authors – Reg Coutts, John de Ridder and Holly Raiche – are veterans of the universal service debates, and each has made significant contributions over many years to the understanding and improvement of Australian telecommunications. The fourth author, Rachel Thomas, is a fresh voice in these debates, and draws on considerable expertise in public policy and economics, as well as the longstanding credentials of her organisation ACCAN, to provide a new framework in universal service.

Taken together, the authors' papers suggest that the challenge for all of us in what lies ahead is in marrying the various aspects of universal service policy in its contemporary setting, while doing justice to the transformations involved in digital technologies. All of the authors are in furious agreement about the broad parameters of the present conjuncture. Namely, however it might be phrased, it's a digital life. Digital technologies have become taken-for-grant in everyday life.

To be sure, in Australia especially, we lack good, detailed, longitudinal data – on the use, consumption, and implications of Internet, mobiles, social media, and associated technology – to really gain an accurate picture of Australian digital transformations in the way that, for instance, *Pew Internet and America Life* project does for our North American counterparts. We especially require nuanced, precise knowledge concerning the various groups, communities, and demographics, and the social, cultural, linguistic, gender, and other dynamics that comprise the Australian population to properly understand the 'demand' side of current and future communications.

Better research aside, in many ways, the problem might lie in the fact that universal service policy (especially given its origins in telecommunications policy) has become divorced from the more dynamic social and technological innovation and policy trajectories of digital technologies (especially given computers, Internet, and mobile phones have originated in different kinds of markets, social imaginaries, and legal and policy traditions).

Coutts and de Ridder, in particular, make reference to mobiles as an obvious and essential element in universal service policy. This is something that first began to be proposed approximately a decade ago, and that has been a mainstay in design of universal service, access, and associated policy in developing countries and emerging markets, in particular. Yet mobiles have not been well integrated – if at all – in the universal service policies of the 'global North' countries, especially those members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Mobiles have yielded remarkable universal service-like effects – notably with the invention of pre-paid charging. Yet the near universalisation of mobiles as the mainstay of communications for billions of consumers globally – and for most Australian consumers – and has remained oddly divorced from the issues that universal service needs to address. This gulf is obvious in the 'work-arounds' and glaring omissions that characterise Australian telecommunications affordability policy (discussed by de Ridder).

Thomas draws attention to the need to base universal service policy on fundamental sound accounts of humans, why they communicate, and what the social as well as economic implications of such communication – if properly supported – might be. In particular, she draws on the 'capabilities' and development approach of the distinguished economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, to argue for a holistic approach to universal service and broader communications policy. In doing so, her argument reminds us of two vibrant bodies of work that have gained in richness and influence over the past two decades – precisely because of the need internationally to understand the profound ways in which digital technologies undergird daily life.

The first of these is the work in the ICT4D (information and communication for development) and M4D (mobiles for development) area, exploring the ways to better design technology and policy for local and regional users and communities. The second body of work is that of social policy, sociologists, and political scientists in seeking to find new concepts – digital divide, social capital, social inclusion and exclusion, social innovation, social entrepreneurship, a renewed focus on understanding the persistence of social inequalities, connective action, and so on – to understand digital technologies.

The point here is that there has been much generative, new thinking and practice going on in relation to how we can provide wider, and even universal, access to all when it comes to Internet and mobiles. However, these kinds of rich undertakings have not been well joined up – if at all, really – to universal service policy discussions.

In her article ‘From Universal Service to Universal Communications’, Raiche offers a cogent, historically-attuned analysis of the peregrinations of universal service policy in Australia. What emerges from her account are two things. In agreement with the other authors, Raiche concludes that ‘the 1997 version of the USO does not reflect the way people communicate, the technology they use, or the new regulatory framework’. By new regulatory framework, Raiche is especially referring to the National Broadband Framework, but also to the Coalition government’s signature e-government policy – the Digital Transformations Office. What is evident, as Raiche’s paper proceeds, is the way that basic policy rationality has failed when it comes to recent USO policy. Most glaringly, the various decisions made along the road to the NBN – notably the contracts struck between the government and Telstra – constitute roadblocks to rethinking the USO. Instead there has emerged a kind of incrementalism that tended to play out behind the scenes. The cost of eschewing good public policy and open democratic discussion has been our current convoluted, patchwork, and ultimately straitened USO.

Against the background of these tangled histories, to echo and amplify the cadence of Raiche, we sorely need a ‘newly-imagined universal service obligation’. What former Parliamentary Secretary Paul Fletcher described as the ‘underlying policy intention’ of USO – ‘providing Australians reasonable access on an equitable basis to telecommunications service wherever they live’ – remains sound, and obtains broad agreement. How we reimagine this – now, with urgency – to ensure that all Australians share the bounty and gain the capabilities of digital technologies, is the task now at hand; and we thank the authors for getting us well and truly started.

Into the bargain we are grateful to Mark Gregory, the managing editor of *AJTDE*, for his hard work and perseverance, in making this special section a reality. Thanks are also due to Blair Feenaghty and other stalwarts of the *AJTDE* production team, editorial board, and reviewers for their dedicated and unsung labours. *ATJDE*, and its predecessor, the *Telecommunications Journal of Australia* have been the journals of record for research, policy development, and discussion of universal service – so hopefully this latest service to the field will be rewarded by robust debate, stimulating, in turn, better and fairer policy for the future.



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Universal Service Obligation	Public Policy Discussion	USO	Universal Service
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