Introduction to this issue: Internet governance, broadband policy and innovation

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Three telecommunications topics, currently of great importance, are the major themes in this issue of TJA.

National broadband policy

If the federal Coalition (Liberal & National Parties) wins the election on 14 September, one of the consequences will be a radical change to 78% of the rollout of the National Broadband Network. Instead of most of the populace (93%) receiving free Fibre to the Premises (including free fibre access reticulated to individual apartments in multi-tenanted buildings), 78% of us will receive the cheaper (in the short term) but technically inferior (in the longer term) Fibre to the Node access solution. For those who can afford it, there will be a ‘user-pays’ option of contributing between an estimated $2,000 to $5,000 per premises to receive Fibre to the Premises.

But these two major technical point of difference between the two party policies do not explain the potential benefits or disadvantages of either policy for different sets of user groups, let alone to the national economy or to the nation’s future social wellbeing.

To tease these implications out, TJA has assembled an NBN Policy Panel[5] of four experienced telecommunications observers, and quizzed them on the implications of the competing NBN policies. Each panel member brings to bear the lens of a different discipline and a different career trajectory:

- Paul Budde [6] is a marketer who has created his own successful international marketing business (BuddeComm) in telecommunications, and has advised several governments (and the UN Broadband Commission for Digital Productivity) on broadband policy.
- Joshua Gans [7] is an economist whose academic career has taken him via a professorial chair in economics at the Melbourne Business School to his current position as Jeffrey Skoll Chair in Technical Innovation and Entrepreneurship at the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto.
- Mark Gregory [8] is a telecommunications engineer whose career has included operational experience as an engineering officer in the Australian Army before moving to academia, where he is now a Senior Lecturer (and researcher into optical networks) at RMIT; he was awarded the Australian Defence Medal this year.
- Allan Horsley [9], another experienced telecommunications engineer, is best known for his role as Managing Director of ATUG (the Australian Telecommunications Users Group) in the 1990s and subsequently as a Board Member of the Australian Communications Authority, a predecessor to ACMA.

You will see that all four panel members provide fresh insights on the implications of the competing NBN policies for Australia in the period post-2013.

Governance of the Internet domain name system

The international tussles since 2003 over the governance of the Internet, aimed at replacing, reshaping or defending the role of ICANN, have understandably received far more media coverage than the hot debates between ICANN and its internal critics over the processes for selecting new gTLDs (generic Top Level Domains) over this same ten years. It seems that well over 1,200 (out of 1,930) new gTLD applications are now likely to be approved and implemented over the next three years ‘ compared to the carefully staged introduction of the current twenty gTLDs over the past 30 years. Some approve, in the spirit of ‘let a thousand flowers bloom’; others are reaching for the weed killer.

For ordinary netizens, what is at stake includes the potential unintelligibility of the domain name system (i.e. human confusion) and thus lack of trust in new extensions; and the lack of an advocate for the public interest in cases such as the exclusive ownership of previously unbranded generic words such as ‘music’, ‘sport’, ‘love’ or even ‘law’.
For business stakeholders, what is at stake includes potential loss of intellectual property in brand names or place names, the dilution of existing gTLD brands, and the potential for selling counterfeit products over new gTLDs with relaxed rules on eligibility criteria.

By contrast sovereign governments have always been able to exercise a strong influence on ICANN’s policy decisions via its Government Advisory Committee. While this privileging of government inputs has often been frustrating to ICANN’s other stakeholders, this mechanism can be seen as vital in ensuring that a majority of UN members retain their confidence in ICANN and hence will support it during the ongoing UN-convened debates over which body, ICANN or the ITU, should be running the Internet’s naming and addressing systems.

To cast light on the larger Internet governance picture, we publish a paper from ICANN Board member and auDA CEO Chris Disspain and his auDA colleague Paul Szyndler on ‘Navigating the multi-stakeholder morass. The past, present and future of Internet governance’. We then present case studies on the famous .XXX dispute by Dr David Lindsay, and on experiences gained from the .cat registry by that registry’s CEO, Jordi Iparraguirre; followed by an up-to-the-month study of the status of ‘Rights protection mechanisms in new gTLDs’ by Dr Heather Forrest.

Professor Lindsay’s paper is especially valuable for its introductory tutorial section on the history of the concept of legitimacy (and hence trust) of organisations in international law, and how this bears in modern times upon examining the ongoing legitimacy of ICANN and the ITU.

Broadband innovation

In February this year, TJA published seven papers on the theme of ‘early experience with high-speed broadband’. An additional three papers are published in this issue, dealing with telehealth (from medical researchers John Wilson and Sarah Newton); multiplatform innovation with TV distribution via broadband by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (by ABC TV staffers Arul Baskaran, Sally O’Donoghue and Michael Brealey); and ‘The NBN Broadband Applications Canvas’ by NBN Co’s broadband applications adviser Sean Casey.

Also on the topic of broadband innovation is a paper from Indonesian academics Muhammad Suryanegara and Muhamad Asvial on predicting likely successful broadband applications in the Indonesian 4G market, based upon their market research.

I trust that you enjoy reading this issue.