eLaunceston Revisited – A Novel Regional Research Project from 1999

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Abstract: An historical paper from 1999 is republished because of its relevance to using digital communications to boost regional communities and their digital economies. Telstra Research Laboratories created a community website for Launceston Tasmania, with local stakeholder oversight, to test whether locally oriented information can increase the value of the Internet to existing users and make digital access more attractive to non-users.

Keywords: history, telecommunications, eLaunceston, Internet, social media

Introduction

This historic paper (Jenkins & Dragun, 1999) describes a social engineering project undertaken by the Telstra Research Laboratories (TRL), to test whether the use of a website focussed on the local community and local businesses would increase local use of the Internet.

Launceston in Tasmania was selected as a regional centre for the establishment of an Internet Portal. The TRL team worked at the grass-roots level with Launceston stakeholders to develop a project that not only met the expectations of Telstra but could make a substantial contribution to the local community.

The reader needs to be aware that, in 1999, access to the Internet in Australia was typically achieved via dial-up modems with maximum speeds of around 56 kbit/sec. In the eLaunceston project, Telstra offered subsidised ADSL connections with speeds around 100 times faster than dial-up.

This regional Portal provided an ideal environment to test the hypothesis that localised content and applications would stimulate greater Internet usage and take-up. A collaborative approach was adopted to identify community stakeholders and undertake workshops with these stakeholders.

Broader community consultation and focus groups were established to understand local Internet usage and identify wants and needs. Collaborative design workshops were then

undertaken to convert those community needs and wants into Portal features and functionalities. Finally, the Portal was tested and deployed with further development and evaluation.

As the paper notes, the "project has generated significant interest both within Telstra and in the wider community" (p. 83) and the "consolidation of local information in one place within a Regional Portal has been noted as providing a valuable service to the community" (p. 83).

Reading the paper through a contemporary lens, one cannot help but notice the hints at the possibility of social media platforms, almost ten years before Facebook became the world's most popular social media web site.

Reference

Jenkins, A., & Dragun, N. (1999). eLaunceston – A Novel Regional Portal Research Project, *Telecommunication Journal of Australia*, *49*(2), 79-83.

The Historic Paper

eLaunceston -
A Novel Regional Portal Research Project

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eLaunceston is a Telstra Research Laboratories project designed to test the hypothesis that locally-oriented information and services can increase the value of the Internet to existing users and make the Internet more attractive to non-Internet users. A Regional Portal provides an ideal environment to test this hypothesis and the eLaunceston Portal is being developed for this purpose. The project is novel because TRL is working at a grass roots level with Launceston stakeholders to develop a project that not only achieves Telstra objectives, but also has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the Launceston community.

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BACKGROUND

The Internet is a powerful tool that offers businesses, groups and individuals new ways to conduct their commercial and personal affairs. Telstra has made a significant investment in the Internet and it is clearly both in the public interest and in Telstra's interest for people to be able to exploit its enormous potential. There is a large proportion of people, however, for whom the Internet is not currently a meaningful or useful tool.

Telstra Research Laboratories (TRL) has the task of researching new social and technical trends that may impact Telstra, and has undertaken a project to

examine the factors that influence Internet uptake and usage.

Research into the social factors impacting Internet uptake and usage has already been completed overseas. The preliminary results of this research has led us to believe that localised content and applications may increase the value of the Internet to existing users, and make it more attractive for people who are not currently using the Internet. TRL has designed a project to investigate this hypothesis in an Australian context.

Clearly we want to encourage people to go online, and this project gives Telstra the opportunity

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to explore ways of increasing the perceived value of the Internet. The primary objective of the project is to test whether localised content and applications motivate increased Internet usage. We also expect to learn about the range of other factors that influence Internet uptake and usage.

The intention is to grow the Internet business generally. Projects of this nature should ultimately benefit everyone in the Internet industry.

THE PROJECT

A regional 'portal' provides us with an ideal environment to test the hypothesis that localised content and applications increase Internet uptake and usage.

Our definition of a 'regional portal' is a Web site that attracts a high number of repeat users through:
- aggregating local content that is useful and desirable, and streamlining access to that content;
- supporting community building at macro and micro (community of interest) levels; and
- providing communication functionality and commerce services.

The Regional Portal that will provide the vehicle for this research project has been titled the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal. TRL staff are currently developing it in co-operation with the community of Launceston, Tasmania.

Launceston has characteristics that make it an ideal city to use as a base for the project. The main factors influencing the decision to select Launceston as the site for the project were the following:
- The Tasmanian Community Network process has energised the community around information technology and given the project fertile ground to work.
- Launceston City Council is innovative and was very receptive to this project concept.
- Launceston is large enough to provide the project with demographic diversity, but not so large that the project will be overwhelmed by other activities.
- There was strong support from Telstra staff based in Launceston for the project. The enthusiasm and commitment of local staff will be key to the success of the project particularly as TRL will be managing the project from Melbourne.

The *eLaunceston* project will involve:
- Existing products - the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal will include well-established functionality such as email and chat.
- Trialling of new products and services with the Launceston community - these products and services may be tested via the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal or they may be tested separately.

- (Perhaps) the generation of new product ideas
- Social and technical research.

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Research conducted within a community should strive to contribute to the local region in ways that are desirable and useful. To ensure that the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal is developed to reflect and extend the needs and wants of the Launceston community, TRL invited local representatives to participate in the development and design of the Portal, and such collaboration will be encouraged for the duration of the project.

This interactive approach between TRL and the local community imposes some overhead costs on project management. However, the project will significantly benefit from the collaboration, as people are more likely to engage with something that they feel they some stake in. A regional portal is driven by content generated by the community and, in that sense, we are reliant on community input to make *eLaunceston* work in any case.

The process for involving the Launceston community in the *eLaunceston* project is multi-faceted, with a number of steps.

Step 1 - Introduction to Stakeholders

Initially key community stakeholders were briefed on the project concept and their ongoing participation in the development of the project was invited.

Step 2 - Workshopping with Stakeholders

A workshop was held with key stakeholders to flesh out the project concept and scope. The goals for this workshop were to:
- Develop a shared vision for the *eLaunceston* project and a shared understanding of the project scope; and
- Establish a Local Project Management Team for the project.

Two clear community goals were articulated during the Workshop:
- The Launceston community wants to increase understanding and use of the Internet for the economic and social benefit of the region.
- They want to use *eLaunceston* as another vehicle to promote the Launceston region nationally and internationally.

It is important for the project to acknowledge these goals and, as much as is possible, to support their achievement. It was agreed that a useful and important part of the project would be a local Project Management Team, to:

- Provide a local perspective on the project, its role and impact on the community;
- Identify local community goals for the project
- Identify possible local community and management contributions to the project; and
- Provide guidance on involving other members of the community in the project.

The Local Project Management Team currently consists of representatives of:

- The Launceston City Council
- The Examiner newspaper
- Tasmanian Electronic Commerce Centre
- TAFE Tasmania
- Australian Maritime College
- University of Tasmania
- The Department of Education
- Tasmanian Community Network
- Launceston Chamber of Commerce
- Business North

- Northern Tasmania Division of General Practice
- Telstra Business Solutions

Step 3 - Community Consultation

Consultation was then expanded to cover a broader cross-section of the community. TRL goals were to:

- Identify and understand related projects (existing and planned)
- Identify and contact people and groups who might be impacted (positively and negatively) by the project
- Explore community needs, wants, concerns, and priorities.

Step 4 - Focus Groups

Focus Groups were conducted with randomly selected local Internet users to discuss:

- Activities currently undertaken within the Launceston community
- Interaction within Launceston community
- Trends in local Internet usage
- Launceston community needs and wants.
  The goals associated with the focus groups were:
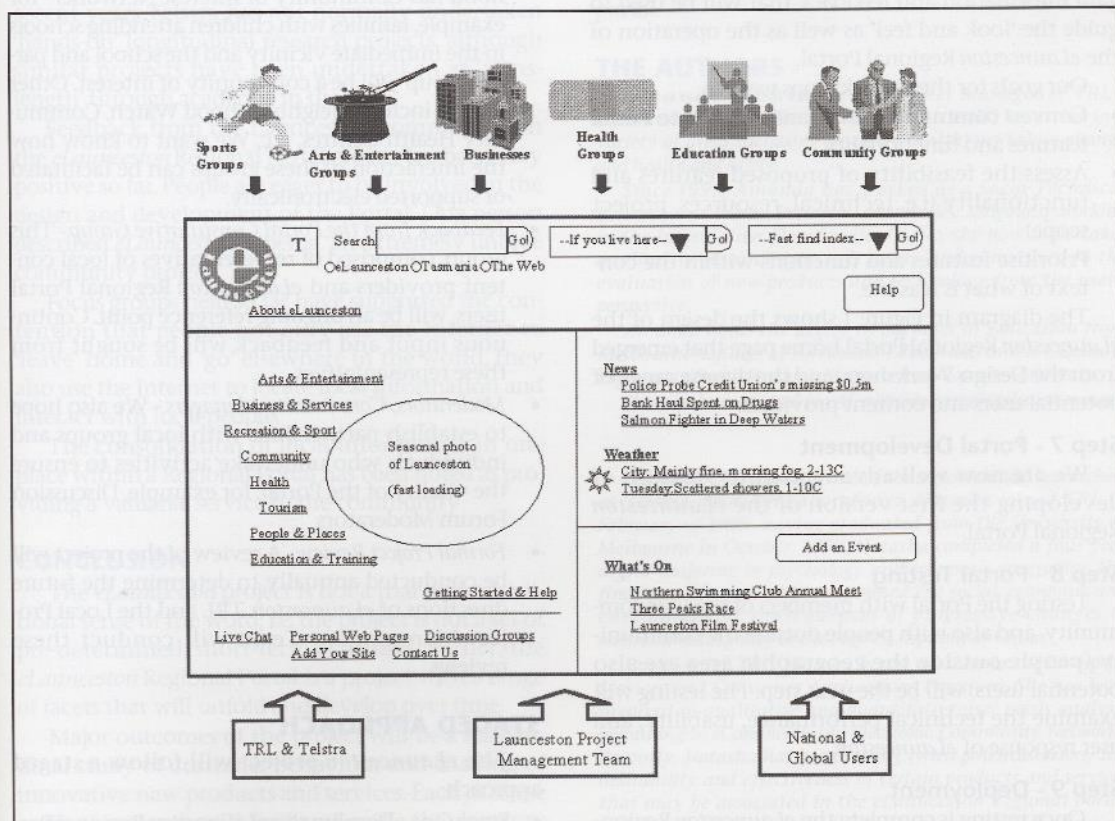- To increase the project team's understanding of

Fig. 1 - The Regional Portal Home Page

the local context for the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal
- To identify the range of local information and services that are already online
- To get an indication of the services and activities that could be migrated to an online environment or that could be augmented by an electronic service.

Step 5 - Extended Community Consultation

Consultation with the Launceston community has been expanded to address issues raised in consultative forums. TRL is now working closely with representatives from the local IT industry to explore the ways in which *eLaunceston* may provide mutual benefit to TRL and the local IT industry. TRL are also in discussions with the Management Committee of the new public Internet access facility in Launceston, to consider the role of the facility within the *eLaunceston* project.

Step 6 - Collaborative Design Workshops

Collaborative Design Workshops were held with participants invited from key sectors, such as health, education and tourism, within the Launceston community. The aim of the Design Workshops was to gain information and feedback that will be used to guide the 'look and feel' as well as the operation of the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal.

Our goals for these workshops were to:
- Convert community needs and wants into Portal features and functionality
- Assess the feasibility of proposed features and functionality (i.e. technical, resources, project scope)
- Prioritise features and functions within the context of what is feasible.

The diagram in Figure 1 shows the design of the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal home page that emerged from the Design Workshops and the diverse range of potential users and content providers.

Step 7 - Portal Development

We are now well advanced in the process of developing the first version of the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal.

Step 8 - Portal Testing

Testing the Portal with members of the user community, and also with people outside the community (people outside the geographic area are also potential users) will be the next step. The testing will examine the technical performance, usability, and user response of *eLaunceston*.

Step 9 - Deployment

Once testing is complete the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal will then be deployed.

Step 10 - Ongoing Development and Evaluation

Development and evaluation of the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal will be an ongoing feature of the project to ensure that content and applications remain useful and desirable to users. We expect that the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal will evolve throughout the course of the project.

The evaluation of the Portal will include:
- *Feedback received via the Portal Site* – feedback forms will be available via the Portal site.
- *Server statistics* – popular pages, number of users, etc.
- *In-depth research* - (eg interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires) with a sample of the Launceston community: approximately 200 households and 10-15 small businesses. This sample, comprising existing Internet users and non-Internet users, will be our Research Reference Group.

  We plan to recruit the households from a particular area within Launceston. We are seeking people within neighbourhood proximity because one of the topics of interest for the project is Community of Interest Networks. Every neighbourhood has Community of Interest Networks - for example, families with children attending schools in the immediate vicinity and the school and parent group will be a community of interest. Other groups include Neighbourhood Watch, Community Health Centres, etc. We want to know how the interaction of these groups can be facilitated or supported electronically.
- *Feedback from the Portal Consultative Group* - This group, comprised of representatives of local content providers and *eLaunceston* Regional Portal users, will be an ongoing reference point. Continuous input and feedback will be sought from these representatives.
- *Moderators/Community Managers* - We also hope to establish partnerships with local groups and individuals who undertake activities to ensure the vitality of the Portal, for example, Discussion Forum Moderators.
- *Formal Project Review* - A review of the project will be conducted annually to determine the future directions of *eLaunceston*. TRL and the Local Project Management Team will conduct these reviews.

STAGED APPROACH

The *eLaunceston* project will follow a staged approach:
- Stage One - Develop the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal

The goal of stage one will be to enhance access to locally oriented Web content. We shall deploy advanced searching tools and directories to facilitate the users' access to this content.

- Stage Two – Support the community.

  In this stage, we shall add the functionality that will give the Launceston community additional communication mechanisms. For example, email, chat and bulletin boards will be features of the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal. These features will enhance communication within the Launceston community.

- Stage Three – Create a supportive online environment for businesses.

  The focus of this stage will be on e-Business applications.

It is possible that the *eLaunceston* project will be greatly expanded by a proposed Telstra and Federal Government initiative to develop a Telstra Multimedia Development Laboratory in Launceston. The *eLaunceston* project will be folded into this initiative.

INSIGHTS FROM THE PROJECT

This project has generated significant interest both within Telstra and in the wider community. In recent years Telstra has not normally undertaken 'hands-on' longitudinal research projects, although similar projects have been undertaken at 'arms-length' through academia in the past.

Feedback from the Launceston community on the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal project has been very positive so far. People are eager to be involved in the design and development of the Portal. One person described *eLaunceston* as being 'an extremely unique community project'.

Focus groups held so far have supported the contention that people not only use the Internet to 'leave' home and 'go' elsewhere in the world, they also use the Internet to locate local information and interact with local people.

The consolidation of local information in one place within a Regional Portal has been noted as providing a valuable service to the community

CONCLUSION

The *eLaunceston* project is not a trial in the traditional sense of the word; i.e. the project is not a set of pre-determined, short-term activities. Rather, the *eLaunceston* Regional Portal is a project with a range of facets that will unfold and develop over time.

Major outcomes of the project will be a longitudinal study of customer behaviour and trialling of innovative new products and services. Each of these areas of research will feed and guide the development of other areas. This convergence of inquiry and evaluation over an extended period of time is what makes *eLaunceston* such a novel research project.

Not only is the project novel within contemporary spheres of Australian Internet research, but the role of TRL within the project represents an innovative departure from tradition. TRL, with other Telstra stakeholders, will work at a grass roots level with the Launceston community over a period of years. We will not be trialling a single, specific piece of technology and then withdrawing. Instead we will be building a strong relationship with a community through a project which recognises both Telstra and Launceston goals, and which involves social and technical research and commercial relationships which will be of benefit in the present and in the future. The research will not only address lifestyle and technology, but also the usefulness and usability of specific technologies.

The key message of this project proposal is one of collaboration and co-operation.

Whilst *eLaunceston* is still very much a work-in-progress, we believe the *eLaunceston* project can be a model for projects that involve the community. We also expect that *eLaunceston* can provide important insights into the value and viability of the regional portal.

THE AUTHORS

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Since 1993, Amanda has worked as a Socio-Technical Researcher at Telstra Research Laboratories. Originally working in the Information Flow Studies Group, she now undertakes qualitative research into user needs, and is involved in the evaluation of new products and technology from the user's perspective.

Amanda holds the degree of Bachelor of Education from Melbourne College of Advanced Education, and a Graduate Diploma in Social Research Methods from Latrobe University.

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Natasha Dragun is one of the sociotechnical researchers at Telstra Research Laboratories. Natasha joined TRL in February of 1999, having graduated from the University of Melbourne in October, 1998. Natasha completed a four year degree majoring in psychology and economic geography. Her final year Honours thesis examined the social, economic and environmental consequences of progressive changes to environmental policy in the People's Republic of China.

Upon joining TRL, Natasha began work across the Enterprise Services and Consumer Applications Programs. She has been involved in qualitative and quantitative user needs analysis pertaining to eCommerce and Electronic Community Networks. Recently, Natasha has been testing (with potential users) the desirability and effectiveness of certain products and services that may be associated in the eLaunceston Regional Portal project.

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