

Vale John Burke (1942–2023)

A Tribute to a Man who Contributed Much to Australian Telecommunications, TelSoc, and to All of his Communities

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Abstract: John Burke was a long-term member of TelSoc, a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of this *Journal*, and Convenor of TelSoc’s Broadband Futures Group. His sudden and unexpected death on 24 August 2023 was received with shock and great sadness by his colleagues in many fields, including in TelSoc and the ex-Telstra diaspora. This tribute focusses on John Burke’s substantial contribution over a long period to the telecommunications sector, but provides some indication of the other work that he did over his 81 years for the various communities of interest of which he was part. John believed in the power of informed communities to take action to improve society in terms of equitable outcomes and opportunity, and persistently acted on that principle.

Keywords: John Burke, Obituaries, Australian telecommunications, First Nations, TelSoc

Introduction



Figure 1. John Burke in 2009 at Mallacoota

John Burke lived a full life and had an amazing capacity to pursue matters of public policy and community interest that he considered could deliver real and tangible benefits to communities and to society at large. It is this clear thread that runs through his life story, even though, as he admitted, his career paths were not clear to him when he started out or for some time later ([Burke, 2022](#), p. 39).

John saw his life and work as “episodic” (Burke, 2022, p. 39). The telecommunications episodes are the focus of this tribute, but other episodes provide a context within which to better appreciate the work that he did and his contribution. This tribute does not touch on some areas of John’s rich and varied life, such as his work with communities involved in conservation and environmental sustainability. However, the pattern and the values that he espoused were consistent.

Early Life

John Philip Burke was born in Melbourne on 28 January 1942, and grew up in the beachside suburb of Sandringham. He was a serious student and leaned heavily towards mathematics and science in his academic orientation. He also leaned towards athletics and this was a major focus of his teenage years, through the Sandringham Athletics Club. John himself has noted that, between mathematics, science and athletics, he had little time or energy for other interests in those years. However, John’s high achievements in athletics reflect his intense dedication to everything he did.

He was enrolled in a Science degree course at the University of Melbourne and studied there from 1959 to 1961. He majored in Pure Mathematics and the Theory of Statistics. In 1960, he was awarded the Dixson Scholarship for Pure Mathematics, a result that he attributed to a well-developed exam technique rather than superior insights into the subject (Burke, 2022, p. 38). He was invited to undertake an honours year in 1962, but he declined, because that course of action would lead to an academic career, which was not what he was seeking at that stage.

Instead, he joined IBM in London. But he soon returned to Melbourne to undertake further education to develop his capacity to become a teacher. He completed a Diploma of Education at the University of Melbourne and a Bachelor of Education at Monash University.

He also undertook post-graduate studies at Stanford University for a Master of Science degree on a Fullbright Scholarship. These studies, which consisted of considerable course work and a research assignment, would have resulted in a PhD had John completed them. His research field was in statistical techniques, with a minor discipline in computer science, a fast-developing field in those days. John found that there were fundamental limitations to computer-aided education. He says: “What it [the experience] gave me though was the understanding that, within the relationship of computer science and education, there was no developmental path for me, just one of critique” (Burke, 2022, p. 53). John’s commitment to education was enhanced, but his commitment to computer-aided approaches diminished.

He returned to Australia and became a secondary teacher in Victoria for a while.

The Malvern Learning Exchange

In 1971, John and his first wife, Kerry, moved to East Malvern. They were both heavily invested in the possibilities of community action to advance local community-based learning opportunities. Kerry was a lecturer in economics and had recently spent 18 months teaching in Japan.

In 1971, they started planning with friends and neighbours to take a major initiative in “de-formalised” education through what was to become the Malvern Learning Exchange, one of a number that were being established in Melbourne at that time ([Neighbourhood Houses, 2022](#)). The initiative was written up in *The Age* newspaper in December 1973:

“They stocked a shop in Malvern with education books, toys, games, musical instruments, a card-index system and a small computer terminal for teaching purposes and typesetting. A roster of volunteer helpers was worked out.

“At first the exchange worked by handling inquiries over the telephone or from people who dropped into the shop. Everyone they met was encouraged to fill out forms and become “resource people”, listing their hobbies and interests and any skills they might be able to share with others” ([Mathews, 1973](#)).

The Age article records the wide diversity of people’s interests at the time and the need to scale up the processing of matching interests and service providers:

“Those whose wires crossed were put in touch with each other. But there were so many left over that it soon became necessary to establish a newspaper to gain a wider audience and to provide a forum for articles, ideas and discussions. The newspaper now [December 1973] appears monthly and has more than 400 subscribers throughout Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea” ([Mathews, 1973](#)).

John noted that the first exchange was housed in a shop called the Lexicon Shop in High Street, Armidale ([Burke, 2022](#), p. 61).

John’s commitment and involvement in setting up the Malvern Learning Exchange is testimony to his persistence and to his determination to find practical means of implementing initiatives that will make a difference to the communities served. I especially mention this period of John’s career because it was a forerunner to other similar initiatives and programs in which he later became involved.

The Learning Exchange had a long-term impact. Over 120 newsletters and articles were produced in the years to 1983. However, it struggled financially and barely made enough to

keep going. There were various attempts to resuscitate it after John left, but it was finally closed in the mid-1980s ([Burke, 2022](#), pp. 62–65).

Commission for the Future

The Commission for the Future was established by the Hawke Government in January 1985, and its creation was greatly encouraged by the then Minister for Science, Barry Jones MP.

“It focussed on issues affecting the future including the predicament of youth, the ecology of health, sustainable environments, improving skills in Australia, technological change and law, management and work organisation, education futures, biotechnology, the information society, foreign affairs, the greenhouse effect, labour trends and population studies.” ([EOAS, 2011](#)).

The Commission was contentious throughout its existence from 1985 to 1998, and was generally considered to be underfunded ([EOAS, 2011](#)). A more detailed assessment of the Commission’s achievements and challenges by Richard Slaughter suggests that the Commission:

“... attempted to carry out a wide range of projects and initiatives, many of which were intended to raise public awareness. But most projects were issues-based and it was not until rather late in the piece that standard futures methodologies were even contemplated. In this it differed from most other IOFs [Institutions of Foresight]. The initial selection of staff was dictated more by a political agenda (Jones was the Federal Minister for Science) than a professional one, and this coloured the nature of the organisation from the start. At no time thereafter did any full-time employee possess a background in FS [Future Studies]” ([Slaughter, 1999](#), pp. 93–94).

This was the organisation that John joined in 1987 as a Deputy Director. His role within the Commission is unclear. However, from discussions with John in recent years, the author believes that his work was related to the future of education and to the planning process itself. He did attribute to his time with the Commission further development of his views about the rigour and integrity required if planning and related processes are to be effective and accountable. The downside, for John, appears to have been that the Commission was not gaining much traction and not providing the practical impact that he sought and achieved via the Learning Exchange. He left in 1988.

Telecom Australia and Telstra

John joined Telecom Australia in early 1989, taking up the position of Manager, Consumer Liaison and Policy Research, reporting to Ted Benjamin (and via him to Graeme Ward) in

Telecom's Melbourne Headquarters. Due in part to the controversial proposal to introduce timed local calls, Telecom decided to establish a formal consultative process with consumer representatives. The first formal meeting of the Telecom Australia Consumer Council occurred in June 1989. Initially, representatives of ten consumer organisations met quarterly with Telecom senior managers. Under its formal structure, the Council was co-chaired by a senior Telecom executive and an elected consumer representative ([Communications Law Centre, 1996](#)). The Council evolved to the Telstra Consumer Consultative Council and operated until August 2009.

John's responsibilities included managing this consultative process. His knowledge of the community sector and his excellent collaborative style were instrumental in establishing the process and making it effective. One of the early engagements with consumers related to credit management and organisation responses to consumer hardship. John oversaw the establishment of the credit management working group, the first of a number of working groups which reported to the Consumer Council. There were significant improvements to Telstra's policies, products and services over time in this area.

Other benefits from this process included a continuing focus on people with disability and accessible telecommunications, product and service innovation, an affordability study, a pricing accord, raising awareness about public policy matters such as access to high-speed broadband, to name a few ([Smith, 2000](#)).

In 1991, John took up the position of Assistant Director, Business Planning, reporting to Graeme Ward, Managing Director, Corporate Strategy. There is no doubt from John's own observations then and later, confirmed by others who knew him at the time, that John found the process of corporate planning in a large and complex organisation to be stimulating, challenging and very frustrating. The need to compromise in order to move forward was not something that came easily to John, particularly when he was unable to engage directly with some of the higher levels of decision-making in Telstra.

Graeme Ward recalls:

“I moved John to run the business planning process in the company to bring together Telstra's corporate plan both for internal consumption and to present to the Federal Government, as Telstra was 100% Government owned at that time. John worked closely with the late John Murphy to embed the overall company strategy into individual business unit plans across the company.

“This role was extremely challenging given the size and complexity of the company and the often-competing objectives of the key stakeholders, being corporate Telstra—both Strategy and Finance—the business units and Government.

“John took on the role with his characteristic energy and collaborative style without shirking the challenge, working the issues and with the team produced credible corporate plans approved by the Telstra Board and acceptable to government” ([Ward, 2023](#)).

John resigned from Telstra in 1994, by which time he was the Group Manager, Business Planning, Telstra Corporate Strategy ([Burke, n.d.](#)).

Centre for International Research on Communication and Information Technologies (CIRCIT)

CIRCIT was set up in 1989 to provide independent research and education on information and communication services. The aim was to create new knowledge relevant to the community, industry and government, so as to increase the social and economic wellbeing of people in Australia and other parts of the world. It was established with funding from the Victorian State Government, Telecom Australia and other organisations.

John Burke took over as Director of the Centre for International Research on Communication and Information Technologies (CIRCIT) in 1994. This was a transitional time for CIRCIT as it moved from state government funding for its first five years to being independently funded. John kept CIRCIT operating through research funded by industry and the state government on a project-by-project basis, which was financially very challenging. In 1998, CIRCIT accepted RMIT’s invitation to become part of the university. John Burke left CIRCIT in 2000. It closed down in 2001.

John’s major contribution was to bring users, technologists, industry and policymakers together to talk to each other. Having worked with technologists, industry and policy makers, it was important for John that design and policy related to communication and information technologies led to effective solutions for everyday problems. His work with community organisations had focused on social justice and a fair society. This meant information and communication technologies had to work for all consumers, including the most marginal and vulnerable users.

CIRCIT under John Burke contributed towards an understanding of the use of information and communication technologies in the home, developing a monitoring framework for the effective use of online services, trust and electronic money, small business and electronic commerce, a design for the effective use of corporate email, and the multimedia strategy for the Victorian Government.

This research contributed to CIRCIT and RMIT's participation in the Smart Internet Technology Cooperative Research Centre 2001–2008, followed by the Smart Services CRC 2008–2014. John's continued involvement with RMIT after he stepped down as Director, CIRCIT meant that he could help hone the users' perspective in the CRCs, which, by definition, brought together technologists, users, industry and policy makers.

As one of John's close associates at CIRCIT, Professor Supriya Singh, has observed:

“It was not sufficient just to bring these diverse groups together. Conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches continued to differ. We needed a common language that went beyond disciplinary, industry and policy jargon. It was difficult to get people to speak plain English. Even when we succeeded by focusing on bridging concepts such as ‘trust’, ‘design’ and ‘effective use’, our initial questions were different. Though providers and policymakers are intensely interested in the way people use products and services, they start with questions about products and services. ... It is a testimony to John Burke's emphasis on user-centred design and his ability to get people from diverse fields to work towards a fairer society, that researchers were able to work together on banking, electronic money and financial inclusion; security design and social and cultural practices; the users' perspective in digital rights management; trust, control and design; Pacific youth, digitising cultural collections and juvenile justice in New South Wales; and new media services” ([Singh, 2023](#)).

First Nations Issues

After he left CIRCIT in 2000, John became far more interested in issues of environmental sustainability and those affecting First Nations people. This in many ways was a continuation of his interest in inclusion and in ensuring that basic services and amenities were available to those who are marginalised or disadvantaged.

He wrote:

“I joined Whitehorse Friends for Reconciliation in 2002 and was impressed by the work of people there – notably a weekend conference on Whitehorse Deliberates on Indigenous Issues, organised by Howard Tankey and Pam Morrison in particular, which brought over 100 Aboriginal and non-aboriginal members together for a very fruitful discourse.

“Sid and Julia Spindler had established the Towards a Just Society Fund in the early 2000s. Various points of contact emerged with TJSF's activities, including the Fund's

support for Evonne Goolagong's establishment of a tennis program at Box Hill Secondary College. I also got more closely involved in the mid-2000s around the Fund's engagement with Worawa Aboriginal College at Healesville where I did some specific project work assisting them in planning and submissions" ([Burke, 2022](#), p. 84)

In 2006, John was asked by Sid Spindler to attend a meeting of the Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service (FVPLS, now Djirra). This meeting was the start of a 10-year association between John and Djirra, and also with the national body ([Burke, 2022](#), p. 85). John was instrumental in developing programs and strategic plans and in seeking funding from various levels of government and other sources.

When Sid Spindler became terminally ill, John took over as Chair of the Management Committee of the TJSF in 2016, and explored ways in which the Fund could be passed to an Indigenous-managed group to determine the allocation of philanthropic funds. "In 2018 TJSF broke new ground in Australian philanthropy when core funding totalling almost half a million dollars from TJSF and the estate of Les Dalton was used to establish Koondie Wonga-gat Toor-rong (KWT), Victoria's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropic fund" ([Richards, 2023](#))

TelSoc

In 2013, TelSoc (Telecommunications Association Inc., publisher of this *Journal*) and the *Journal* were both established in their present form following a period of amalgamation with the Australian Computer Society, which did not work out. John was invited to join the Editorial Advisory Board of the *Journal* in February 2019. He was known to many members of the Board from his work in Telstra and CIRCIT.

Together with others on the Board, John took the initiative to establish a group of volunteers who eventually formed themselves into the Broadband Futures Group within TelSoc. Their aim was to encourage government and industry to take the lead in developing a long-term plan for broadband communications and social and economic digital inclusion in Australia that would be transformative and overcome the short-term partisanship that had, at that time, characterised the sector for over a decade. John convened the Group, which met regularly before and during the COVID pandemic period, to develop a planning framework and proposal and to organise presentations and public discussions on various aspects of Australia's broadband experience and aspirations.

Initially, events were in-person; then, at the outset of the lockdown period, they were hybrid, and, finally, they were conducted online. All of the events were well attended and most were the subject of articles in the *Journal*. They include:

- NBN Futures Forum: Encouraging Debate on NBN Ownership Models ([Campbell & Milner, 2019](#));
- NBN Futures Forum: Realising the User Potential of the NBN ([Campbell, 2019](#));
- NBN Futures Forum: Learning from International Experience ([Campbell, 2020](#));
- NBN Futures Forum: Social and Economic Benefits of Broadband Networks – Telehealth and Digital Inclusion ([Campbell et al., 2020](#));
- NBN Futures Forum: A National Broadband Strategy for Australia ([Holmes et al., 2020](#));
- Broadband Futures Forum: Regional and Rural Broadband Access – City Standards in 10 years? ([Campbell, 2021a](#));
- Broadband Futures Forum: The Rise of 5G and the NBN ([Campbell, 2021b](#));
- Broadband Futures Forum: LEOs and how they differ from GEOs – OneWeb’s plans in Australia and Competitor Differences ([Pritchard-Kelly & Costa, 2022](#));
- Broadband Futures Forum: Affordability of Broadband Services ([Campbell & Mithen, 2021](#));
- TelSoc Broadband Futures Forum: ABAC AgriTech Report ([Waters & Koch, 2022](#));
- TelSoc Broadband Futures Forum: 5G Trends and Developments presented by Ericsson and Telstra (held online on 23 November 2021);
- Taking the Digital Economic Strategy (DES) to the next stage (held online on 17 March 2022);
- TelSoc Forum: Australian Broadband Advisory Council e-Health Report (held online on 22 March 2022); and
- Regional Connectivity and Shared Infrastructure: NSW and New Zealand ([Adams et al., 2022](#)).

This represents a very full, diverse and rich body of work by many contributors, and John was the convenor and persistent facilitator of the initiative. He wanted to achieve a structured and serious discourse, both within TelSoc and with engagement with policy makers, community organisations and the industry, to ensure the widest possible involvement in making robust and enduring plans. He also wanted to ensure that plans, or proposals for plans, were not made once and forgotten about (often called “set and forget”). With his active participation, TelSoc made and published assessments of progress towards a national digital

communications strategy at the end of 2021 ([TelSoc BFG, 2021](#)) and 2022 ([TelSoc BFG, 2023](#)), respectively.

A major step forward for John and TelSoc was in July 2022, when he and the author met with the then-recently appointed Minister for Communications, Michelle Rowland, in Melbourne, in order to have the Government take up the scoping of a national digital communications plan. The Minister was indeed receptive and her Department has now commenced industry consultations to see how the whole issue might best be taken forward. John participated in this work literally to the end of his life. The TelSoc Advocacy Working Group (successor to the Broadband Futures Group), comprising John, the author and Andrew Hamilton, were scheduled to meet with the Department the week following John's death. The meeting went ahead, but John was sorely missed, then as now.

Looking back on John Burke's extraordinary contributions, over a long period, to his various communities and to the sectors in which he worked, Emeritus Professor Trevor Barr summarised it thus:

“John was a man of Integrity in both his personal and professional lives. For decades he was involved with the computer, telecommunications, and information industries, together with allied research and in public policy. He had a commendable approach by often asking this question – if we are living through an information revolution, who are the revolutionaries? Back in 1987, he summarized his philosophical position about the complex changes underway. He asked then: How many people know about these changes? Would everyone feel free to use these services? Are they easy to use? Are they affordable? ([Barr, 1987](#)). ... These issues essentially guided his investigations during his multiple dimensional professional life – for the next fifty years!” ([Barr, 2023](#)).

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