

TelSoc President's Report on behalf of the Board 2022-23

Coverage of this Report

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Introduction

During 2022-23 COVID restrictions were largely lifted, enabling TelSoc to make plans to resume in-person meetings, particularly for the major events, the Charles Todd Oration in Sydney and Henry Sutton Oration in Melbourne. However, as will be evident from the comments later in this report, TelSoc has not reverted to a pre-COVID normal, nor settled on some form of new normal. We are an Association that is very much in transition.

Membership

TelSoc is a membership organisation, and its capacity to meet its charter of facilitating public discourse on issues, challenges and developments in the telecommunications sector depends on its having a credible membership base into the future.

As the Treasurer's report indicates, our revenue is largely linked to membership. Being a voluntary, not-for-profit organisation, our interest in revenue is simply to enable us to operate. Maximising revenue for its own sake is not what we are about, so long as we can continue to function.

Our membership has been slowly declining, reflecting what happens when former industry participants retire or lose interest. Our efforts to market the benefits of membership to a new generation of prospective members has not yet borne fruit.

During 2022-23 we sought to tap into a range of personal networks in order to reach out to a more diverse audience in terms of age, professional coverage and gender. Our first move in that direction was to ensure that the diversity is reflected in the composition of the Board. Hopefully, that process will continue into 2024.

We have never had any worthwhile results in attracting student members. As a result of the student internships that we organised in 2022-23 and in the current year, we think that we should try harder. There are some motions on the Notice Paper for this meeting that will, if passed, assist in that area.

We have not been able, yet, to establish regular lunchtime events in Melbourne. We will seek to do that in both Melbourne and Sydney during 2024. These programs offer networking opportunities that are not possible online, and encourage membership growth and retention.

Board

At the 2022 AGM the candidates offering their services on the Board were fewer than the vacancies. In addition, there was no nomination for the position of Secretary. When the new board met, it appointed Allan Horsley to that position. During 2023 one of our long-serving Board members, Craig Watkins, was forced by his employment circumstances to take leave for the remainder of his term. We thank Craig for his valuable service, and hope that he might be able to re-engage in future. Also during 2023 we invited Elise Ball to join the Board. She did, and we are very appreciative of the work that she has done in that capacity since.

Events

The two key events – the Henry Sutton Oration in Melbourne and the Charles Todd Oration in Sydney – are now firmly back as fixtures; but other events less so.

- Henry Sutton Oration

The Henry Sutton Oration Melbourne lunch has been traditionally run in the first half of the year. In 2022 it was run in May. However, this year it was deferred to August because of the circumstances of our preferred venue, the Angliss Restaurant. We have been pleased to support the Willam Angliss Catering College, a TAFE organisation, over the years and have always received excellent service from the staff and students.

Our 2023 Henry Sutton Orator was David Tudehope, Managing Director of Macquarie Technology Group (formerly Macquarie Telecommunications). David gave an excellent speech which focussed on the development of the sector and his strong focus on delivering high quality customer service.

- Charles Todd Oration

The Charles Todd Oration was held, after a gap of some years because of COVID, in October 2022, and we were delighted to have as the Orator, Michelle Rowland, the Minister for Communications. She canvassed a wide range of issues and interests

in her address, which was well received by the well-attended event. In the tradition of the Charles Todd Oration, her speech was followed by a question-and-answer session with the audience. An article based on the Oration was published in the March 2023 issue of the Journal.¹

We have been able to maintain the level of interest in 2023 with an excellent presentation by Rob Nicholls of UNSW Business School, introduced by the Minister. This year's Charles Todd Oration and lunch was held in Sydney on 12 October, and well-attended by a very diverse audience of members and other guests.

Rob gave an excellent speech on the development of regulation from the time of the colonial administrations to the present day, and focussed on the adequacy of current regulatory tools to address the regulatory needs associated with very different markets and technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence. It is expected that an article based on the speech will appear in the December issue (Volume 11 No. 4) of the Journal.

- Other events

During the three years before June 2022, we were able to generate a lot of interest and events dealing with various issues and themes associated with the work of the TelSoc Broadband Futures Group. Initially these events were in-person or hybrid, but they became fully online once COVID restrictions were imposed after March 2021. The benefit was to extend potential audiences across the country, but at the cost of the networking and other benefits that members gained from earlier forms of live participation.

In July 2022, John Burke (Convenor of the TelSoc Broadband Futures Group) and I met with the then newly-appointed Minister and her Chief of Staff. We were keen for the Minister, her office and her Department to take on the next stage of establishing a longer-term, national digital communications plan. We have traction on that, and the Minister has arranged for important scoping work to occur in the Department. It is still proceeding. One consequence of this is that the TelSoc Broadband Futures Group has now been disbanded in its original form, and is no longer a generator of event topics and themes. The reduced numbers of lunchtime events in 2022-23 is apparent.

The events in 2022-23 were:

- Beyond NBN: Improving digital inclusion through a national Digital Communications Strategy (21 February 2023, online event)
- The role of flexibility in a distributed and renewable grid (8 December 2022, in conjunction with Engineers Australia SA Division)

¹ <https://telsoc.org/journal/jtde-v11-n1/a720> or <https://doi.org/10.18080/jtde.v11n1.720>

- ACCC and the challenge of the telecommunications market (22 November 2022, online event)
- A Human-in-the-loop approach to fibre optic network design (29 November 2022, online event)
- The impacts of technology on electromagnetic spectrum trends (2 November 2022, online event)
- Aboriginal responses to the Overland Telegraph Line, 1870s–1930s (16 August 2022, online event)
- Hugh Bradlow: Post-pandemic Telecommunications (21 July 2022, online event)

Journal of Telecommunications and the Digital Economy

During 2022-23, under the leadership of the Managing Editor, Leith Campbell, the Journal has continued to go from strength to strength, with four issues for the period. Sourcing articles and peer reviews, and producing a Journal of the requisite high standard and reach is a major task. On behalf of the Board and the members, I want to recognise the substantial work of Leith as Managing Editor, the section editors, contributors, peer reviewers and the Editorial Advisory Board for continuing to produce a journal of such high standard. The Journal has continued to source materials from a wide diversity of locations, centres of learning and areas of expertise.

A separate report on the Journal has been provided to members.

Internships

During 2022 the Board considered a proposal from Dr Michael de Percy to use students from the University of Canberra to undertake research of interest and value to TelSoc, for which they would gain credit in their courses. The Board committee to oversee the arrangements comprised Dr Michael de Percy and Dr Leith Campbell, both of whom were experienced in tertiary education. The first research covered the approaches in other countries in establishing plans and related frameworks for broadband development and for digital communications generally. A report on the research was published in the Journal at the end of 2022² and was the subject of a lunchtime online event earlier this year.³

² De Percy, M, Campbell, L. H., & Reddy, N. *Towards an Australian Digital Communications Strategy: Lessons from Cross-Country Case Studies* JTDE, Vol 10 No. 4 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.18080/jtde.v10n4.650>

³ Beyond NBN: Improving digital inclusion through a national Digital Communications Strategy (21 February 2023, online event)

A further research project is being undertaken by a student from the University of Canberra at present. This research involves the customer experience of Australian subscribers to Starlink satellite services. It will be reported on in due course, likely through the Journal and possibly via a lunchtime event.

Policy Development and Engagement

As mentioned earlier, TelSoc now is able to pursue its agenda directly with the Minister, the Minister's office and the Department. Our agenda is fairly simple, even if achievement has proved to be elusive over the years, and that is that the Australian Government should take a more active part in ensuring that there is a national digital communications plan that is long-term, potentially bipartisan, and which delivers the continuity of purpose and commitment that will encourage investment and development of the sector, and also promote digital inclusion. The Department has established a 2035 Telecom Plan Team to scope this idea further, and has embarked on a series of low-key, but hopefully effective, consultations to that end. To have got to this stage is, in itself, an achievement for TelSoc.

I have to report on the sad and sudden death in August 2023 of John Burke, who did so much as the Convenor of the Broadband Futures Group to develop TelSoc's approach to longer term planning for the sector. We will miss him greatly.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the work of the Board and all of our active and interested members during the year. We are a voluntary organisation and can only continue to make a contribution through continued effort of our members as volunteers.

Jim Holmes
President, TelSoc

November, 2023