

THE EMERGING ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY AUSTRALIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN THE WSIS PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), conducted by the UN held its main meetings in 2003 in Geneva. A group of academic researchers in two Australian centres undertook to lead a consultation process with concerned Australian individuals and groups to create a statement that encapsulated the expectations and aspirations of a nascent 'civil society' in Australia. They presented their findings to the Summit. The two groups – the Centre for Community Networking Research (CCNR) at Monash in Melbourne, and the COIN Internet Academy, at Rockhampton, in Queensland -- coordinated the establishment of the Roundtable for Australian Civil Society (RACS).

Civil society has not been a widely-used term in this region of the globe, so an initial phase of engagement was to determine what it meant to Australians, and in what forums it was articulated. As a global platform for government, business and civil society to engage as partners in development of policy and to share experiences of successful practice, WSIS aimed to improve global access, and equity in digital inclusion in the widespread use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT). The international acknowledgement of the necessity of engagement of 'civil society' as an equal partner with business and government was a refreshingly innovative way to stimulate energetic debate. The concept of civil society as a basis for community engagement had neither form nor function in many places.

Using Participative Action Research (PAR) and Grounded Theory (GT), this paper reports on the emergent process in Australia, examines some of the underlying issues of identification of civil society, describes opinions about Australia's global role, and makes recommendations about necessary future strategies to enhance engagement. These researchers are concerned about the ongoing lack of WSIS interest in reflective practice, which they believe should parallel the mass of consultations occurring on other topics of permanent global significance.

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INTRODUCTION

The processes for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) mandated by the UN General Assembly (Resolution 56/183) in December 2001 clearly recognised that Information and Communications Technology (ICT) would have a profound impact on global equity and required a committed international cooperation. In setting up the processes for conducting the WSIS (Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005), the UN specifically recognised three sectoral components as having equal legitimacy in the issues, organisation and management of the WSIS itself and the many associated events that would provide relevant input. These components were: the governments of United Nations membership, business and civil society. In giving a concept of civil society such prominence, the United Nations processes for WSIS clearly recognised that the inclusion of civil society was an essential component to addressing the profound opportunities (and problems) that ICT offers global equity, governance, peace, prosperity, understanding and increasing self-reliance. The WSIS processes realised that simple access in itself would not address needs adequately, that mere consultation was insufficient and that effective use of ICT required a collaborative approach by business and government with civil society. Assessments have been able to conclude that much of the benefit of the WSIS in Geneva 2003 was related to the dialogue that was created in the preparation for the Summit and the legitimacy that this dialogue was given by the Summit (Calabrese 2004: 327).

This paper reports on the process of engagement of Australian Civil Society in the Geneva WSIS for 2003 through the establishment of the Roundtable for Australian Civil Society (RACS) and the subsequent extended processes for WSIS in Tunis in November 2005. It can be argued that the concept of civil society engagement in government processes in the manner envisaged by the United Nations for WSIS is new to governance in many nation states.

FOUR CONTEXTS

In examining issues surrounding the role of ICT in addressing human needs three primary concerns emerge. These issues then lead to a serious call for acknowledgement of the social appropriation of ICT.

1. Information and Communication Technology

Systems as outlined in Table I, Harris (2002) makes the fundamental point that the technology has grown to include a societal component that requires the application of new skills and new ways of thinking for society, governance, business, international agencies, research, teaching and service delivery. The existence of this conference, that of the WSIS process, the emergence of serious dialogue around the so called 'digital divide', and the large volume of donor funds being allocated around the world, bear serious testament to the recognition of these needs.

The social aspects of technology itself are developing rapidly with increasing ubiquity, mobility with rapidly decreasing costs. This adds a dimension that is redefining accessibility, voice communications, as well as governance and business, within nation state boundaries. Technological development is inexorable, deserves attention and requires collaborative effort in order to maximise the benefits for human prosperity. Many international alliances and large nation states have now recognised this need. As a result they are working on strategies that will prepare them for an information society that includes a concept of civil society as a target for skills development, engagement, decision making and societal cohesion.

Civil Society

The concept of civil society for the WSIS was developed from the original Brenton Woods definition and includes the recognition of a number of 'family groups'. In reactive terminology, it includes 'that which is not government and not business'. Like many concepts such as 'community' and 'social capital', the concept of civil society both within and across nations and cultures is often easier to imagine than to consistently define.

However, in many well developed traditional democracies the concept of civil society is not well recognised and its needs are often considered to be served through a public service mechanism that supports an segmented approach to the NGO sector. Experience is now showing that despite the best

efforts of governments in both developed and developing situations, issues of ICT inequity in the emerging Information Society are not being adequately addressed (Hewitt and Pinder, 2003; Barossa, 2005; Blanke and Lopez-Claros, 2004).

Whilst the concept of civil society may appear fuzzy, its power to profoundly change society should not be underestimated. For example the issues of slavery, apartheid, gender emancipation and environmentalism were all upheld in various forms by hegemonic societal structures of the day. However, through collective action of civil society, these issues and many others have now been brought in such prominence by civil society, that behaviour in mature societies in these matters is now regulated.

Table 1

Dominant Technology	Information Systems Locus	Work group focus	Dominant referent discipline	Scope
1960-70 Mainframe Computers	Electronic Data Processing	Clerical Staff	Computer Science	The Organisation
1970-80 Mini-Computers	Management Information Systems	Managers	Management	
1980-90 Personal Computers	End User Computing	Knowledge Workers	Organisational Behaviour	
1990-2000 Networks	Strategic Information Systems	Shareholders	Economics and Strategic Management	
2000 - current The Internet –increasing mobility & ubiquity	Community Informatics	Customers/Citizens	Social Science; client engagement	Society

Harris (2002)

Governance and Public Agency Service Delivery

In a traditional developed democracies, such as exist in Australia, government regulates the business environment, government operates a representative governance and the people hold governments to account by means of regular elections. This form of democratic process relies upon line departments providing individual services to the people under broad direction from the government of the day. The various capacities of ICT to: 1.increase efficiency and integration of service delivery; 2, create business independence outside of regulatory control in increasing economies of scale; 3, allow people to seek services outside of the nation state, and; 4,encourage people to seek increased iterations with governance structures, is posing pressing fundamental questions for the established models of balance in governance and accountability in service delivery.

Pressure is particularly evident in the increasing numbers of governments and alliances of governments which are establishing various forms of ‘e-government’ agencies, transformation programs, and community engagement processes all around the world. Many of these efforts report directly to the nation state’s Cabinet Office, President’s or Prime Minister’s offices. In further recognition of the need to modify traditional models of governance and service delivery, the Accenture e-Readiness report (Rohleder & Jupp, 2004) which arguably is the most credible international comparison of e-readiness, finds that such transformation processes are the most important next level that nation states need to reach in the appropriation of ICT.

An important component is a recognition of the need for co-operative effort with civil society in order to provide seamless, accountable and accessible governance. It must be aligned with real societal need, co-ordinated across agency and with the existing Community Based Organisation (CBO) structures, and integrated into service delivery and performance measures. Importantly such an approach includes full consultation, but also moves further into participative processes. Whilst this may appear challenging to some, it is being increasingly recognised in the international agencies. The forward-looking established democracies, and many of the emerging democracies, are seeing that better outcomes are obtainable by recognising the fundamental changes that ICT will have on governance and service delivery.

Social Appropriation

In drawing the issues of the technology, civil society, governance and public service delivery together in the context of the emerging Information Society, it becomes obvious that there needs to be a concerted effort to appropriate ICT for social change. Much of the effort on the use of the ICT to date has focused on internal organisational contexts and has been driven by an inflexible economic paradigm. Whilst this style has provided many benefits, a new effort needs to include appropriation of ICT for complete social change. The idea of social appropriation of the technology includes a recognition that the input of societal needs in new technological developments is essential, and that whilst the emerging mobile and wireless technologies might provide increased opportunities, they have still been primarily designed for a market economy-based plan.

Electronic networks have become the platform on which much of civil society operates, using it for collaboration, knowledge sharing, publishing, mobilisation and observation (Dutton 1999). It is in this domain that many of the challenges currently exist and there is now increasing research and some policy development occurring in this arena around the world. Surman and Reilly (2003) have identified equity for public space, impact assessment, trust for collaboration, sustainability of effort, and enclosure threatening the open nature of the Internet, as significant issues for social appropriation of ICT.

METHODOLOGY

The Centre for Community Networking Research (Monash University) and the COIN Internet Academy (Central Queensland University) were commissioned by the former National Office of the Information Economy (NOIE) to undertake a consultative process to develop a civil society perspective as part of the Australian contribution to the WSIS processes. There was no constituted peak representative body for the 'civil society families' recognised by the WSIS process. As a result an ad hoc organisation called the Roundtable for Australian Civil Society (RACS) was formed as a means to elicit a statement from Australian Civil Society for the Geneva phase of WSIS. This body included representation and inputs from the peak bodies representing the 'civil society families'. To find organised elements of civil society the investigation looked to trade unions, religious groups, foundations, community organizations, social movements, non-government organizations and non-profits, volunteer organisations, charities, cooperatives, professional associations, educational institutions, clubs, public media, and others.

For the second phase of WSIS (Tunis 2005), a similar approach was been taken, with the Centre for Community Networking Research (CCNR), Monash University, serving as the convening body in collaboration with the Foundation for Development Co-operation (FDC). This resulted in a detailed Draft Strategy (Schauder, Johanson, Denison and Stillman, 2005) that is intended to advance strategies contained in the Government's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004-2006, as well as provide an appropriately action-oriented statement for WSIS2. The consultative process towards the documentation was extensive, involving a wide range of stakeholders in Australian civil society. Consultations have been held in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, and the information from these sessions has been supplemented by extensive research and analysis from relevant knowledge resources. The detail of the processes used and events and participants involved in can be obtained from CCNR (<http://www.ccnr.net>).

This research used Participative Action Research (PAR) (Dick, 1999; Lau 1997; McKay and Marshall, 2001) and Grounded Theory (GT) (Charmaz, 2000; Stoeker, 2005) as methodologies balanced against adaptations of Structuration proposed by Giddens (1984) and Orlikowski and Robey (1991).

Technological determinism views IT development as being independent of society and its needs; that IT development shapes society, but is not reciprocally influenced by society. Researchers such as Day (2001) have found support for the proposition that IT development is often shaped by economic factors such as reducing costs and increasing revenues or efficiency measures in order to sustain capitalist patterns of power authority and ownership.

Further, authors such as Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) and Schiller (1985) point to the diffusion of Internet technologies and the commodification of information as reinforcing the hierarchical power of capitalism. Under these scenarios Internet technologies centralise power and work against the interests of community through calculative rationality. However, whilst there is abundant evidence for the themes just described, continually reinforced by the mass media, the social shaping of Internet technology has another very different aspect. It is an emerging interest based in the concepts of Community Informatics

(CI) as espoused by Gurstein (2000), Schuler (1996), Day (2001), Harris (2001) and others, as well as being the foundation for national and international collectives such as the Association for Community Networking (AFCN, USA), Foundation for Community Networking (FCN), the European Association for Community Networking (EACN) and the Community Informatics Research network (CIRN). This approach is in direct contrast to the concepts of technological determinism, techno-economic capitalism, social exclusion and cultural capitalism, which not only reinforce and centralise power structures within communities, but disadvantage sections of society in developed and developing countries. The central concept of the power of social shaping of ICT provides a rationale for the CI approach, which in turn is recursive (a Giddens' term) and strengthens both the applications and the communities themselves.

The interaction of these two largely opposing philosophies forms the basis of simultaneous and sequential interactions of Internet technologies shaping society and society affecting the structural use of ICT. This process was described by Giddens (1984), Orlikowski and Robey (1991) and others as 'structuration':

FINDINGS

In developing the Statement from Australian Civil Society (<http://ccnr.net/ws/roundone.htm>) for WSIS (2003), the investigation aspired to support an engaged and informed civil society, which was aware of, and empowered by the multifarious capacities of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). It was based on the view that the use of ICT should not drive the direction of civil society but that, given the right conditions, ICT would act as enablers, facilitating self-organisation, digital inclusion, participatory decision-making, and a more knowledgeable society.

The data collected revealed the following 10 concerns as being the most significant to participants:

1. Indigenous Australians; 2, Digital inclusion and spatial Isolation; 3, Democratic plurality through ICT; 4, Inclusion and interoperability; 5, Access to content and technology; 6, Effective use, not just technology; 7, Volunteers in civil society; 8, Rights to privacy; 9, Knowledge sharing and intellectual property; 10, A continuing dialogue.

The Statement clearly recognised Australia's ability to contribute to policy development, research, praxis and service delivery, while addressing issues of digital inclusion and effective use of ICT through a prism that validates civil society in key decision-making. It recognised the need for governance processes to allocate resource and policy prominence to the intersection between civil society with digital inclusion and effective use of IT products and services. It made clear the point that effective use (a topic now validated by the UN), was of sufficient import for Australia's future to be considered in the same way as education, health, security, infrastructure, industry development were to previous generations.

The second round involved a wider set of consultations and delved more deeply into the alignment of the findings with the existing Australian Government strategies. It identified a number of major themes, including; 1, Perspectives on the nature of civil society; 2, Civil society, social capital and the learning society; 3, Ongoing networks and keeping up with technology; 4, Digital inclusion and consumer choice; 5, Participation in the political processes: 'e-democracy'; 6, Governance and co-ordination; 7, Sustainability of projects, and ; 8, Research needs.

Civil society, which has only recently been recognised in Australia, is generally regarded as separate from democratic political institutions, their associated delivery agencies and businesses. It acts for public good in the space between the state and the market place. Public good is as important to civil society as markets or governance which it sees as not being always able to champion this need against their sectional interests in the emerging information age. In this light, community-based ICT projects which often drive to create social and cultural capital are poorly understood by service deliverers, business and donors, which normally function in an ideology of economic rationalism. Hence, evaluation of civil society projects in the information age often ignores and/or undervalues the difference between a product and a public good. Developing a cohesive society that values the legitimacy of the government, business and civil society sectors on an interlocked basis and to engage jointly with the pervasive nature of ICT, challenges many concepts of a nation state's own capacity for economic, social and cultural self-reliance. Based on the four years of fieldwork that lies behind this paper, a legitimised interest in the social benefits of ICT has come late to the growth of an information society in Australia. Many other nation states have already recognised the widening gaps between the sectors, and cemented the underpinning infrastructure in place to allow them to maximise their shared identity, cohesion and economic commonalities. There is

a great urgency to develop national and state agencies to facilitate needs analysis, response mechanisms and evaluative processes in the civil society sector.

Civil society makes a valuable contribution to social capital, human capital, social cohesion, the provision of services and information, the development of a learning society, and the economy, which all are of increasing importance into today's uncertain world. In this situation there is an increasing need to develop and monitor realistic standards for information literacy, civic literacy, civic intelligence, life-long and life-wide learning. A flourishing civil society is an essential component of the success of all such processes. One of the great difficulties government service delivery agencies face in the current and emerging information age, is how to reinvent themselves in ways that provide co-ordinated modularised services to an electronically enabled citizen. Also, civil society faces challenges in keeping current with the technology that is of use to it, not only in terms of knowledge and skills but also in terms of cost. Many governments in developing countries, supported by substantial donor money, are committed to moving to an open source software environment. In such circumstances, the software can and is being designed with features that support civil society and not simply a model of organisational efficiency. The current trends towards the concentration of the software and support markets are not in the best interests of independent nation states, which seek to strengthen a concept of an information society that can develop economic, social and cultural independence in a competitive globalised world.

As larger business entities develop ICT-enabled interactions with customers, there is increasing evidence of financial disadvantage to those who cannot interact with business in this manner. This marginalises sections of society that can least afford it and experience to date clearly shows that public access and short-term funded projects simply do not work. Civil society is best placed to assist in ameliorating this dearth of interest in appropriate engagement.

Whilst many governments are recognising the absolute need to develop programs for e-government and are committing large resources to this effort, the underlying issue is that the attitude to the technology is often limited to one narrow perspective – just increasing efficiency within existing agency structures. Such a position is unsustainable; governments use the technology in a managerialist manner, to trim salary and wages costs in order to balance the increasing costs of Enterprise Resource Planning software (ERP). As experience the UK has found, such an approach without the active involvement of civil society, is expensive and ineffective (Hewitt and Pinder, 2003). Further, the promise of more participative processes in governance is ultimately inevitable and in such circumstances a healthy and informed civil society sector is essential to developing useful engagement and improving decision making.

With the current development in ICT and its appropriation by business and media, Articles 19 and 27 of the Human Rights Declaration, which articulate the rights of expression and participation in the cultural and scientific advancements, are subjected to an intense spotlight. It is civil society that is fighting to preserve rights which are fundamental to any form of a mature and equitable society. Hence it is in every nation state's interest to ensure that it fosters a healthy, innovative and vibrant civil society sector. The benefits of a properly networked society supported by a mature interaction between business, government and civil society are incalculable when evaluated against the costs of disaster management, security and disintegration and division.

In such circumstances, nation states can benefit from a continuing and well developed research program around the role of civil society and its interaction with business and government in the development of an articulate, engaged and informed society.

DISCUSSION

There are three main views on the impact of technology on culture:

1. Substantive, determinist view: In this view technology is seen as a new social system that restructures the entire social world, leading to the destruction of pluralism, diverse languages. Most research emphasizes this view;
2. Instrumentalist, neutralist view: In this view technology is devoid of specific content or values, and is indifferent to the ends for which it can be used. Any resultant problems are created not by the technology, but by the way that it is used;
3. Technology is ambivalent, neither deterministic nor neutral; in this view the design of the technology incorporates values, in addition to the values given it by users. The technology is seen

as a scene of struggle. It suggests that technology requires a social organization to become technology in the first place. The interactions with technology changes people and people change the technology at the same time. Social organization will determine the levels of determinism/neutrality or sets of values, not technology itself.

Hence, technology is both a tool and an agent -- in human hands. . Among the major schools of action/structure theory, actor network theorists most directly articulate the agency attributes of technology: its power to modulate human scope of action (Law and Hassard 1999). In the final analysis, however, information technology is a tool: it cannot substitute for human will and human values. As Agre (1997) notes, machinery does not reform society, repair institutions, build social networks, or produce a democratic culture. People do, and the Internet is simply one tool among many that can enhance social networks (Tomaselli, 2003).

The RACS consultation process has been an exercise in grounded theory, and community-based action research, which has highlighted some successes, problems, and pitfalls, and balanced these against Giddens's concepts of structuration and notions of governmentality and subtle powers of control. The distillation of the data gained from extensive consultations by means of RACS forms an interesting set of ideas that challenge the current roles and directions of government, business and the resource-rich 'families in civil society,' such as public medicine, education and the media.

This healthy process in a modern democracy does not depend on NGOs alone. The actions of civil society can only add value to the benefit of all of society, and the institutions and individuals with it, as well as the sustainability of the nation itself.

The activities of RACS have focused civil society aspirations through the provision of the Statement from Australian Civil Society (WSIS 2003) which summarised the status quo, and expressed a range of ideals. A formal Strategy has been developed during 2004 and 2005 that can interact with and assist the development of the Australian government's views of the possible advantages of a civil society plan for the future. This project has provided the first Australian forum for civil society with local and national consultations, roundtable workshops and initiated a website that can act as a basis for the formal emergence of civil society aspirations.

This project has traversed social action in natural settings, seeking civil society opinions based on the daily practical experiences of participants across the country. The RACS consultations enabled simultaneous data collection and analysis, intermediate analytic writing, and the rechecking the categories of civil society concerns by means of further focus groups. Priority was given to the views of the participants; theoretical analyses provided interpretive renderings of social reality in situ. Gaps in the collected data were filled by means of further consultations. When a saturation point was reached, a high degree of repetition, the collection of data was stopped.

A major deliberate aim of Participative Action Research is to seek to find solutions to a practical problem and to show the practical benefit from the action taken. Until this project was initiated, there was no national civil society voice or forum for the social appropriation of ICT. Following this process allowed for further actions, iterations of experiences based on more extensive consultations. Participants were able to play multiple roles in their contributions to the consultation process, thus enhancing the richness of the data and its interpretations. Some were (at one and the same time) informants, interpreters, planners, implementers, facilitators, and recipients. Disconfirmation was allowed for in the consultations, to the extent that drafts of the prior consultations were provided for further comment, and the Strategy Draft was aired widely and critiqued extensively before being finalised.

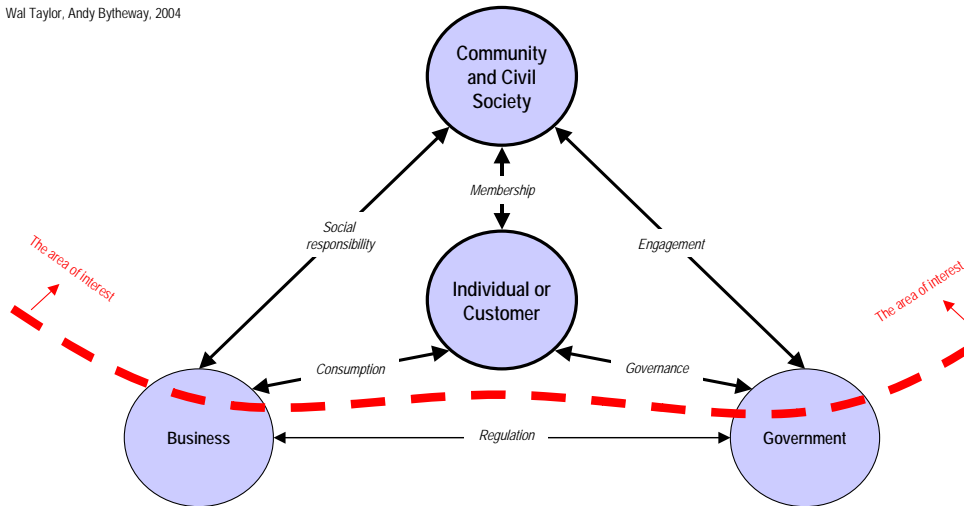
RACS was formed alongside the Community Informatics Research Network (CIRN), to bring together specialist researchers from more than 50 countries. Hence it has helped to promote international research interest in electronically enabled community networks for community engagement and link Australia into this valuable network and resource. Further, it has promoted specific connections with other civil society groups in Russia, New Zealand, Mexico, Canada, USA, Puerto Rico, Sweden, South Africa, Italy and the UK. In developing a position for research on the role of civil society in the emerging information age, it is useful to layout a framework for Community Informatics research which is the discipline that underpins the social appropriation of ICT. Figure I, demonstrates a framework for linkages between civil society, government, business and the individual. It adds a new dimension to the traditional 'service provider

model' or customer view of relationships between individuals, business and government which has become increasingly adopted in recent times. Mapping this new dimension in such a manner allows research and the evaluation of service delivery by agencies to be described and categorized in a more useful manner. A more detailed paper on the theory and application of this framework for research, policy development, service delivery and praxis, which was initially described at the Australian e-government Conference in 2004 (Taylor, 2004) is forthcoming.

Figure 1

**Community Informatics:
A model for relationships**

Wal Taylor, Andy Bytheway, 2004



CONCLUSIONS

This paper has also made a substantive case for the establishment of a specific research effort for the social appropriation of ICT. Such a research effort does not sit comfortably with technology or market driven research directions which tend to dominate the current research funding mechanisms, and hence needs to be established independently in the same way that major funding in the European Union is directed. Furthermore, the work to date and summarized in this paper, points to a strategic gap in the provision of higher education in the study of community informatics and its related research efforts.

This work has proffered the case for ICT being neither deterministic nor neutral, and for it being both an agent and tool. In such circumstances, it is important for the ultimate benefits of ICT to be realized in nation states to provide a systematic means for hearing and collating the diverse voices of civil society to form a basis for whole-of-government and intergovernmental policy and action in information society matters. Such a position has been mandated by the United Nations in the WSIS processes and many countries have followed suit.

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