Australian Civil Society, WSIS and the Social Appropriation of ICT: Account and Interpretation of a Consultative Research Process

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Abstract

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is the largest peacetime summit to be conducted by the UN. It held its first main meeting in 2003 in Geneva, and the second will be held in Tunis in 2005. A group of academic researchers in two Australian centres undertook to lead a consultative research process involving concerned Australian individuals and groups to create a statement as input to WSIS1, and a Draft Strategy report as input to WSIS2, which encapsulate the expectations and aspirations of a nascent ‘civil society’ in Australia. The two academic 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). RACS participants were drawn from a wide range of civil society backgrounds. The findings of the RACS research process are intended not only as inputs to WSIS but also to Australian policy development on the information economy.

Civil society has not been a widely used term in the Australasian region of the globe, so an initial phase of engagement in the RACS process was to determine what it meant to Australians, and in what forums it was articulated. The WSIS program has been conducted by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) on behalf of the United Nations (UN). 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 communication technology (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. Development of the RACS process for the WSIS has been supported by the Australian government, which values for civic input.

Using participative action research (PAR) and grounded theory (GT), this paper reports on the two-part RACS research process and interprets the findings in terms of the emergence of civil society as a stakeholder in ICT policy development in Australia. It 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.

Keywords
Community informatics, civil society, social appropriation of ICT, Australia, WSIS

Background to the two-part research process
The two phases of an Australian research process (‘the RACS process’) on ICT policy and civil society were prompted by the planning of the two-part World Summit in the Information Society (WSIS), and preceded the Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005) WSIS meetings. The abbreviation RACS stands for the Roundtable on Australian Civil Society.

WSIS was mandated by the UN General Assembly (Resolution 56/183) upon recommendations from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in December 2001. The ITU and UN clearly recognised that information and communication technology (ICT) would have a profound impact on global equity and required a committed international cooperation. It is of some interest that it was the ITU as the business and regulatory technology function of the UN and not the financial or welfare arms which formally recognised this need. 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 UN membership, business and civil society. In giving a concept of civil society such prominence, the UN 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 for global equity, governance, peace, prosperity, understanding and increasing self-reliance. The UN 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.

The initial WSIS conducted in Geneva in December 2003 attracted more than 15,000 official delegates and more than 60 official delegations of heads of state. It was created through a process of five UN official preparatory committee meetings (PrepComs) and hundreds of support meetings of official UN bodies and regional government and donor sponsored meetings across the world. The WSIS event was also used as a venue for many aligned subject-specific meetings related to issues of ICT equity. These often provided the first opportunity for many matters of deep concern to be discussed by civil society in international forums. These included meetings and displays associated with ICT for Development.
(ICT4D), the voice of indigenous and first nation’s peoples, the impact of ICT on small island nation-states and the role of local authorities and cities in the information age.

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, p. 327).

The authors of this paper firstly alerted the Australian Government (Department of Trade and Foreign Affairs (DFAT), and National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) in the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts) to the emerging opportunity for civil society engagement in the WSIS process and then secured funding from NOIE to develop a position for Australian Civil Society in the WSIS processes. 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 Australian governance.

This paper reports on the process of engagement of Australian Civil Society in WSIS1 Geneva 2003 through the establishment of the Roundtable for Australian Civil Society (RACS) research process, and the subsequent extension of the process for WSIS in Tunis in November 2005.

**Context of the RACS research process: Four issues**

In examining issues surrounding the role of ICT in addressing human needs four primary issues emerge. Firstly, there is the evolution and impact of the technology itself. Secondly, there is the concept of civil society as an equal partner in decision-making and governance. Thirdly, there is the impact of the technology and the concepts of a civil society on issues of governance and public agency service delivery. These issues then lead to a fourth concern, namely a serious call for acknowledgement of the social appropriation of ICT.

**Information and communication technology**

The evolution of modern day ICT has come about through a complex process driven by science, security concerns, economic benefit and organisational efficiency. In summarising the evolution of information systems as outlined in Table 1, 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 Queensland conference, that of the WSIS program, 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.
Table 1. Evolution of information systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant technology</th>
<th>Information systems</th>
<th>Work group focus</th>
<th>Dominant referent discipline</th>
<th>Scope</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960–70 Mainframe computers</td>
<td>Electronic data processing</td>
<td>Clerical staff</td>
<td>Computer science</td>
<td>The organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970–80 Mini-computers</td>
<td>Management information systems</td>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980–90 Personal computers</td>
<td>End-user computing</td>
<td>Knowledge workers</td>
<td>Organisational behaviour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990–2000 Networks</td>
<td>Strategic information systems</td>
<td>Shareholders</td>
<td>Economics and strategic management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 - current The Internet — increasing mobility and ubiquity</td>
<td>Community informatics</td>
<td>Customers/ citizens</td>
<td>Social science; client engagement</td>
<td>Society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Harris (2002)

The social aspects of technology itself are developing rapidly with increasing ubiquity, mobility, and rapidly decreasing costs. This adds a dimension that is redefining accessibility, voice communications, as well as governance and business, within nation-state boundaries in many situations. 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 including the European Commission, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, comprised largely of the former Soviet Union states), India and the African continent 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’. A better, positive description is provided later in this paper. 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. For example, civil society in many of the emerging democracies in Western Europe, the sub-continent, South America and Africa is formally recognised in many government policies, strategies and funded programs. However, in many
well developed traditional democracies including Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, 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 a segmented approach to the NGO sector.

It is notable that some well developed democracies, for example the Nordic countries, do recognise a collective civil society. However, experience is 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.

**Governance and public agency service delivery**

In a traditional developed democracy such as exists in Australia, government regulates the business environment, government operates 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: increase efficiency and integration of service delivery; create business independence outside of regulatory control in increasing economies of scale; allow people to seek services outside of the nation-state; and 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 that 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 and Jupp 2004), which arguably is the most credible international comparison of e-readiness, finds that transformation processes are the most important next level that nation-states need to reach in the appropriation of ICT. The key transformation processes are those which address the ICT needs and skills of members of society in all their diversity, and act for the empowerment and inclusion of lower socioeconomic or other marginalised groups.
An important component is the recognition of the need for cooperative effort with civil society to provide seamless, accountable and accessible governance. Such governance must be aligned with actual societal need, coordinated across agency and with the existing community-based organisation (CBO) structures, and integrated into service delivery programs 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 impacts that ICT will have on governance and service delivery. The United Kingdom has committed a serious effort to transformation through the e-government office, the European Commission has established and supported strong programs for transformation, including the Lisbon strategy, and many of the former Eastern European block countries are now using ICT for transformational change.

**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 in the use of ICT to date has focussed 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 into new technological developments is essential, and that whilst the emerging mobile and wireless technologies might provide increased opportunities, they have still been designed primarily 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 the WSIS program. There was no existing entity that constituted a 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 peak bodies representing the UN-defined ‘civil society families’ as well as other stakeholders, both groups and individuals. To find organised elements of civil society the investigation looked to trade unions, religious groups, foundations, community organisations, social movements, non-government organisations 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 has 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 that is intended to advance strategies contained in the Government’s Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–06, as well as provide an appropriately action-oriented statement for WSIS2.

The consultative process towards the documentation for WSIS2 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) and grounded theory (GT) as methodologies balanced against adaptations of structuration as proposed by Giddens (1984) and Orlikowski and Robey (1991).

PAR is a form of action research (AR) that involves the researcher and the community at the source of the investigation as partners using a collaborative approach to inquiry. It provides people with the means to take systematic action and resolve specific problems (Stringer 1996). It normally begins by building a basis for participation by developing relationships between stakeholders and negotiating roles and responsibilities (Dick 1999). PAR is one of the family of AR methodologies in a four-class taxonomy of AR, including AR, PAR, action science, and action learning, that has been used to classify significant IS research (Lau 1997).

The domain for the PAR method has been described as a social setting where:
- the researcher is actively involved, with expected benefit for both the researcher and the organisation
• the knowledge obtained can be immediately applied, there is not the sense of the detached observer, but that of an active participant wishing to utilise any new knowledge based on an explicit, clear conceptual framework
• the research is a (typically cyclical) process linking theory and practice (Baskerville 1999).

PAR has been found to be a valuable tool in encouraging civic involvement in a government setting provided that a local authority can provide the flexibility to operate within the cyclical processes, that they involve an experienced researcher and there is a commitment to eliminate power imbalances (Aimers 1999). PAR has been promoted as being able to enrich the IS research community by drawing researcher-practitioners into the research process (McKay and Marshall 2001; Baskerville 1999) and benefit the local community by contributing to the knowledge-base of the local community (Dick 1999).

In the RACS process, the researchers’ elicitation of civil society viewpoints and aspirations has taken advantage of grounded theory methodology (GT) as well, in the sense that social action in natural settings has been stimulated and observed in detail. Extensive consultations with civil society members and groups across the country over more than two years enabled comprehensive capture and analysis of the implications of the daily practical experiences of participants (Charmaz 2000; Stoeker 2005).

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. Further, researchers such as Day (2001, p. 11) 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. Day (2001) quotes Schiller to reinforce this point:

“Accordingly, once the technology has been tested and is in place, capitalist decision-making at the level of the transnational or national enterprise becomes the guiding feature of the new information sector. Production is geared to profitability and market criteria override any other concerns” (Schiller 1983, p. 88).

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':

“The best and most interesting ideas in the social sciences (a) participate in fostering the climate of opinion and the social processes which give rise to them, (b) are in greater or lesser degree entwined with theories-in-use which help to constitute those processes and (c) are thus unlikely to be clearly distinct from considered reflection which lay actors may bring to bear in so far as they discursively articulate, or improve upon, theories-in-use” (Giddens 1984, p. 34).

In laying the basis for structuration, Giddens (1984) points out that originality of theories in natural science is dependent upon the degree to which they question what people previously believed about them. But theories in the social sciences are already held by the agents to whom they refer and once they are reincorporated within action, their original quality is lost; they become all too familiar (Giddens 1984, p. 34).

Structuration theory has the potential to address the dialectical nature of diffusion/adoption of ICT within a system that can include a community. Data collection in this research investigation identified the interaction between structures and people in shaping each other as an important construct in examining adoption of ICT for community development in a regional setting. At the same time structuration appears to be able to accommodate a case study approach and meet some of the inadequacies identified in other adoption/diffusion approaches and theories.
Data collection and findings

Part 1 — towards Geneva

Data collection for Part 1 in 2003 was primarily based on meetings of RACS in Canberra (May) and Melbourne (October). In addition there was a post-Geneva follow-up discussion in Caloundra, Queensland in 2004. The following names of civil society organisations which took part in the Canberra meeting give an idea of the range of viewpoints that flowed into the discussion: Foundation for Development Co-operation, Federation of Ethnic Community Councils, Australian Library and Information Association, Bakana Cape York Development Corporation. Six universities participated, and government agencies or statutory bodies concerned with civil society issues namely the National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE), the Virtual Colombo Plan — a program of AUSAID, and the National Archives of Australia.

The Canberra meeting initiated a widening interaction within and among stakeholder groups, and the research team in the following months. Broader consultations were conducted by email and in person, including nurturing contacts at conferences in Australia and overseas. The intensity of the interactions was stimulated when stakeholders or researchers attended WSIS PrepComs and other WSIS-related events.

In developing the Statement from Australian Civil Society <http://ccnr.net/wsis/roundone.htm> for WSIS (2003), the investigation aspired to support an engaged and informed civil society, which was aware of, and empowered by the multiple capacities of 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 ten concerns as most significant to participants:

- Indigenous Australians
- Digital inclusion and spatial Isolation
- Democratic plurality through ICT
- Inclusion and interoperability
- Access to content and technology
- Effective use and not just technology
- Volunteers in civil society
- Rights to privacy
- Knowledge sharing and intellectual property
- 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 Australian 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.

**Part 2 — towards Tunis**

The brief from the Federal Department for Communications, Technology and the Arts (DCITA) which succeeded NOIE in sponsoring Part 2 of the research, required that the consultative research should make civil society inputs relevant to the government’s policy document ‘Australia’s Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004-2006: Opportunities and Challenges for the Information Age’, as well as to WSIS2.

The second round of consultations was thus oriented by the following questions:

1. Do members of civil society in Australia have the necessary capabilities, networks, and tools to enable them to participate in the information economy?
2. Do members of civil society in Australia have the necessary ICT capabilities, networks, and tools to help advance their economic, social, education and cultural goals and activities?
3. What barriers currently prevent effective involvement by civil society in the information economy and their effective use of ICT to advance its goals and activities? Barriers may be internal or external.
4. Specifically in relation to use of the Internet, are there governance issues that impact on members of civil society and their ability to participate in the information society?
5. Is civil society using ICT as part of effective collaborations and partnerships with business and government?
6. With regard to the key themes previously identified by RACS, which represent significant concerns for your sector?
7. What is the relevance to, and possible implications for, civil society of the Australian Government’s information economy priorities and strategies?
8. What are the key priorities and strategies needed to facilitate future ICT adoption and effective use by civil society organisations?
9. Are there other concerns or issues that need to be raised in terms of the ability of civil society to make effective use of ICT and/or participate in the information economy?
Discussion and inquiry was not confined to these questions. Participants were free to introduce related or new issues that they regarded as relevant to the intention of the broad process.

Again the range of viewpoints flowing into the study can be gleaned from the names of participating groups including: The Smith Family; Victorian Council of School Organisations Inc.; Uniting HealthCare, Brisbane; Australian Computer Society (Victoria); Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association; Australian Consumers' Association; International Federation of Library Associations; Victorian Council of School Organisations Inc.; Balkanu Cape York Digital Network; APC (Association for Progressive Communications) and Australian ICT Rights Monitor; NT Library Services; Endeavour, Brisbane; People With Disability Australia Inc; Internet Society of Australia; WorkVentures; Community Teleservices; Inspire Foundation; Cyberdreaming; National Forum; and Online Opinion. The Part 2 process again involved government agencies or statutory bodies with a direct interest in civil society issues, and university centres (e.g. Centre for Online Health, University of Queensland). This list is indicative rather than exhaustive.

The resulting report in the form of a Draft Strategy can be viewed on the website of the Monash CCNR website <http://www.ccnr.net/wwis/RACS_Draft_Strategy_Apr05.doc>.

The second round thus involved a wider set of consultations between December 2004 and February 2005 and delved more deeply into the alignment of findings with existing or emerging Australian Government strategies. The Part 2 study was based on a series of consultations, beginning in Brisbane (December 2004), then moving to Melbourne, Sydney and Perth (February 2005). A final national consultation to review this Draft Strategy document occurred in Sydney (March 2005). In addition, the Draft Strategy document was also circulated for comment by email to civil society representatives who were unable to attend the meetings. It featured a number of major themes, including:

- perspectives on the nature of civil society
- civil society, social capital and the learning society
- ongoing networks and keeping up with technology
- digital inclusion and consumer choice
- participation in the political processes: ‘e-democracy’
- governance and coordination
- sustainability of projects
- research needs.

There was much consensus among participants both in Parts 1 and 2. An issue on which disagreement initially appeared to be present was whether a peak body was needed to represent the ICT needs of civil
society groups to government. However as the dialogue proceeded it became clear that civil society was seen as too diverse to benefit from such a hierarchical structure for advocacy. Networked rather than hierarchical structures of communication were regarded as more congruent with the vast differences in scale, objectives and lifecycles of organisations and movements in the civil society sector.

**Interpretation and comment based on the RACS data with other sources**

The detailed findings of the research may be read on the CCNR website <http://www.ccnr.net.au>. The purpose of the remaining sections of this paper are to reflect on the meaning of the findings and other information sources regarding the emergence of civil society as a self-aware entity in Australian society, particularly in relation to the social appropriation of ICT.

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 marketplace. 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 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 three years of fieldwork and associated study that lies behind this paper, it is clear that a legitimised interest in the social benefits of ICT has come somewhat 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 in 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, lifelong 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 coordinated 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 the 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 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, Australia 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.

**Wider implications of the data and interpretation**

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 emphasises 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 organisation to become technology in the first place. Interactions with technology change people and conterminously people change technology. Social organisation 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 the extensive RACS consultations 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.

Quite certainly components of structuration and its subsequent modifications place a focus on the impact of society on governance structures and the social responsibility of business. At times this power is cast in terms of the influence of NGOs alone:
“Civil Society Regulation occurs where NGOs set the standards for business behaviour. Corporations choose to adopt or not to adopt these standards at their risk. While governments have the power of legislation, the ability of civil society organisations to regulate business behaviour through naming and shaming is becoming more powerful” (Johns 2002).

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. Current work obviously requires alignment with the current and relevant Australian government (as well as the state and territory) policies. Scoping for the Australian Framework for the Information Economy (2004–06) has been done in the Draft Strategy as compiled by Schauder et al. (2005).

The RACS research process has focussed 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. The Draft 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. The two-part process described above 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.

The cooperation within civil society afforded by RACS has provided input to Australian government policy, and arguably helped raise the profile of DCITA and DFAT in examining the concepts of a civil society sector in the emerging Information Society in Australia. RACS has also made specific contributions to the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action.

This RACS research process has traversed social action in ‘natural settings’ (i.e. the kinds of meetings and other consultative interactions that are typical communicative modes for civil society groups), 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, i.e. a high degree of repetition, data collection ceased.

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 process 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.

The RACS research has also provided the basis to question whether Australian civil society is special in
any way. Some limited Australian Government funding was provided to support consultations with an
emerging Australian civil society. Not all governments in the WSIS processes for 2003 did this. Some in
fact ignored civil society input altogether, whilst others had to rely upon money from international donors
to bring civil society into the discussions. However, Australia did not support a consistent program of civil
society inputs into the official PrepCom processes or any of the regional meetings that fed into the
PrepCom processes for WSIS 2003 or the current processes for WSIS 2005.

The Australian context provides features that make its civil society different to many other countries.
These include the tyranny of distance in a low population density, a broad appreciation of overseas
cultures (historically high immigration, international travel, expatriate labour force), a reasonably highly
technologised society, cynicism about the political process, grudging cooperation in mainstream political
participation, large volunteering levels, and compassion in times of national or international crisis.
Australia also seems to have a high degree of dependency on government-based solutions to social
dilemmas when compared to many other developed and developing situations. When coupled with a
relatively wealthy lifestyle overall and a relatively large public sector, the construct of civil society in
Australia has some unique challenges in regard to governance, access and the provision of social
services.

RACS was formed alongside the Community Informatics Research Network (CIRN). CIRN brings
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 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 lay out a framework for community informatics research which is the
discipline that underpins the social appropriation of ICT. Figure 1 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 categorised 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.

**Community Informatics: A model for relationships**

Wal Taylor, Andy Bytheway, 2004

![Diagram of Community Informatics Relationships](attachment:image.png)

**Figure 1. Framework for community informatics relationships**

**Conclusion**

In addition to the substantive points made about civil society and ICT in the Australian context, this paper has also made a case for the establishment of specific research effort for the social appropriation of ICT in its entirety. Such 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 reflected 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.

The RACS research undertaken to date clearly identifies the need for Australia and its component states and territories to enhance their current ICT policies in regard to the recognition of civil society as a legitimate third sector. It 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 realised in Australia 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.

The research has produced a Draft Strategy that aligns its findings with current Australian Government ICT policy. In doing this, it has been able to connect the direct experience of civil society actors with world best practice for the emerging information age and add value to the existing framework.

References


