

Public broadcasting and the digital divide

A submission to the ABC SBS Review from Computerbank Victoria (Inc)

Thank your for the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper associated with the review of the ABC and the SBS. The comments here relate to the use of the Internet for the dissemination of program material.

Fast Internet access is becoming an essential item for contemporary Australian homes, along with water, gas and electricity.

Although it is an additional cost to our public broadcasters to provide downloadable program material via the Internet. It would be very easy therefore to decide that people should pay to download program material. However it would be simplistic and wrong for the government to charge the public for downloads from Australia's public broadcasters. There are a number of factors to consider when we look at Australia's broadband usage.

- We are moving into economic times that could well mean there will be an increase of households on low incomes. A large number of people on a low incomes can't afford dial-up or broadband internet. These people are on the wrong side of the digital divide. The ABS states that 30% percent of Australian households did not have access to the Internet in 2007. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Chapter10002008>.
- The Dropping off the Edge Report (Jesuit Social Services 2007) report that the major factors causing intergenerational poverty include: 'low income, limited computer and Internet access, early school leaving, physical and mental disability, long term unemployment, prison admissions and confirmed child maltreatment.'
- 1.55 million Australians are on dial-up (ABS June 2008 quarterly figures) and cannot realistically download programs currently available from the public broadcasters.
- Around 900,000 houses in new housing subdivisions and some rural areas don't have access to broadband Internet because Telstra installed pair gain and RIM technology to cut costs. <http://www.setel.com.au/site.php?id=320> People in these areas have to pay more for Internet via satellite or wireless.
- Regional and rural Australian Internet access is more expensive than city Internet access. Broadband is not available in all areas, whilst satellite coverage is available, this is even more expensive than DSL broadband to install and maintain. 'Rural and provincial electorates have fewer young, tertiary educated people and high income earners than city electorates, factors

which determine Internet usage.' Dropping off the Edge Report – Jesuit Services 2007.

- Older people on a low income are less likely to have access to the Internet than older people with a comfortable income.
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/8146.0.55.001Main+Features12006?OpenDocument>
- The current slow speed of Australia's broadband Internet compared to other first world countries.

At Computerbank Victoria (www.computerbank.org.au) we provide recycled, tested computers from \$15 complete with a full range of open source software, to people with a government pension or health care card. These computers are Internet ready.

Similar organisations exist in Victoria and other states, although many charge more for their services than Computerbank.
(<http://www.computerbank.org.au/links#other-australian-computer-recyclers>)

In our experience it is the cost of connecting to the Internet, rather than the cost of hardware and software, that is the major barrier for low income people.

Many of the low income earners that we meet do not have a phone landline. They prefer to have a mobile phone with a pre-paid plan. This way they can limit their expenses and avoid cost blow-outs.

At the time of writing the cheapest pre-paid broadband Internet plan that we are aware of costs \$30 per month and requires the purchase, up front, of a modem costing \$150. This is ten times the cost of the computer that we can provide. To this must be added the monthly cost of telephone line rental, typically \$30 a month. Our experience therefore is that while access to the appropriate hardware and software is a significant factor in the digital divide, the cost of ongoing Internet access (particularly broadband access) is of equal or greater significance.

Many people qualify for a Telephone allowance, however this is a low \$23 paid every three months to qualified income support recipients or Commonwealth Seniors Health Card holders.

If we add to this the need to actually pay for downloaded content, the cost becomes even higher.

We do not accept therefore that charging for downloads from the web sites of our public broadcasters is consistent with the principle recommended by the 2020 Summit:

Public broadcasting should be funded so that it can deliver to all Australians, wherever they live, free of charge.

The public broadcasters [should be] a hub of the national conversation—the national ‘town hall’.

If the cost of participation in the national conversation was at the minimum \$60 a month plus download charges that conversation could be pretty one-sided.

There can be a temptation for the public broadcasters to raise funds by charging for downloads.

Computerbank Victoria therefore recommends

- 1. That Australia’s public broadcasters be prohibited from charging for downloads of material until fast Internet access is available to the disadvantaged in Australia.**
- 2. That broadcasters use low resolution and compression as much as possible. In recent times it seems that the broadcasters have assumed everyone has fast broadband.**

If you do go ahead and charge for downloads be aware that you are isolating the poor and increasing the digital divide which brings with it social isolation and division. Currently DSL broadband is fraudband.

**Jan Smith
Vice President
Computerbank Victoria
www.computerbank.org.au**