Public Sphere 2.0 Is Here

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The National Broadband Network (NBN) will provide Australians with the opportunity to access a world-class communications network. The possibilities for such a venture are often couched in terms of blue-sky dreaming or simply a new entertainment medium. For the unbelievers, a recent initiative by Senator Kate Lundy has proven that high bandwidth can be used to create Public Sphere 2.0 and that citizens are willing to be a part of the process. A clear message from the participants was that government needs to free-up access to information and enable, rather than block, citizen innovation in creating public value in the information age. This article reports on the ‘Public Sphere: Higher Bandwidth for Australia’ event held by Senator Lundy at the Australian National University on 7 May 2009.

Mass communication has been institutionalised for so long that the term ‘public sphere’ usually refers to the media and the formal arenas where elites disseminate information. However, the idea of the public sphere as a space where citizens debate issues, influence public opinion and shape political action has been for the most part just that – an idea. A major challenge in changing from centralised control of information to multiple channels of one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communication is the slow evolution of institutions; or as March & Olsen (1989) put it: the rules of the game. On one hand, we need to innovate if we are to reap the benefits of high-speed broadband. On the other, the old rules stifle the community’s capacity to experiment and to have a say in the way the country is governed. Technology is evolving quickly but institutions have not kept pace. This will prove to be a major issue once the NBN provides citizens with greater access to information and multiple channels of communication.

For a long time, blue-sky dreamers have been bearing the brunt of criticism over the usefulness of higher bandwidth. This is not unusual as it has happened with every major advance in technology. Some politicians have even suggested that higher bandwidth will enable little more than people to download movies from the Internet. Regrettably, the attitude toward new media, which is enabled by higher bandwidth, has also been the subject of scorn by those who are most likely to suffer from the NBN’s implementation – the traditional media.

Yet some brave politicians have taken the first steps by experimenting with new media to engage with citizens. There are many approaches to using new media and it is becoming obvious that social networking and other high-bandwidth tools provide an extension of an individual’s personality. Indeed, developing a consistent Net identity is quickly becoming a necessity for many professionals, including politicians. This should not be surprising – radio and television had the same impact and those politicians who ignored the (then) new media did so to their own detriment. However, traditional media rarely mention the benefits of new media and tend to only report on its use, tabloid-style, when politicians fumble on Twitter or Facebook.

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Senator Lundy is an active user of new media tools. She maintains a blog and actively engages with citizens on Twitter. She is not alone, but she represents a new generation of politician—one who not only uses new media to broadcast information, but to engage in conversations with citizens. But it is a brave step for any politician to open the flood gates by actually participating online. One of the greatest risks is that citizens’ voices will disappear in a stream of too much information. In an interview on Kiwi TV recently, Canberra new media consultant Stephen Collins provided tips on how to ‘cut through the noise’ on new media. He compared the stream of information to standing on a riverbank watching the river, where you cannot possibly look at every molecule of water, but you might take interest in a leaf floating by, and then refocus as another interesting object comes along. The analogy provides an effective way to reconcile the etiquette problems associated with lost voices—a consequence of information overload. Nonetheless, if an issue is topical or certain views are widely shared, it is not too difficult to notice the odd ‘leaf’.

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Kate Lundy’s Public Sphere (or Public Sphere 2.0) provided a handful of citizens with the opportunity to present their views about how higher bandwidth could be used to improve the lives of Australians. Using a Twitter-style format, a three hour workshop consisting of ten-minute presentations by a small group of citizens (many travelling to Canberra to participate) was video-streamed, live-blogged and tweeted while others asked questions online (including people from WA, Queensland and NSW). Speakers provided real examples of how higher bandwidth could improve healthcare and education, reduce carbon emissions, assist agricultural industries, and increase access to public information. Many of the presentations were accompanied by stories about how innovative uses of broadband were sidelined by entrenched interests or sceptics, or even shut-down by government for reasons stated to be ‘in the public interest’. It became apparent that a major cultural change is required if citizens are to be able to increase public value and take control of who decides ‘the public interest’, especially if the large investment in the NBN is going to be worth our money.

The theme of central control over information and views of ‘the public interest’ are not new. Australia has a long history of government-controlled information and communications networks which do not fit with emerging models of communicating online. Policy making is an area where Australians are often ‘consulted’, but citizens’ stories are rarely mentioned in official reports or do not receive attention unless reported by the traditional media. A major advantage of Public Sphere 2.0 is that these stories are not lost. Indeed, where other citizens identify with tales of woe or shared experiences, a citizen’s story can take on a life of its own. Following the event, blog posts and tweets on topics of interest became a ripple streaming throughout the Net.

People who had not heard about the event in time asked when the next one would be. Others reported their experiences of following the event online in remote areas and the problems with reception, bandwidth and download limits. A rich case study of the issues for citizen engagement online appeared in one, easily traceable stream of information from a relatively simple three hour experiment on a fine autumn morning in Canberra. The possibilities for improving our knowledge and moving toward e-democracy seem endless. The efficiencies to be gained by enabling citizens to participate in Public Sphere 2.0 make the older Public Sphere 1.0 look like a creaking hulk crammed full of centrally-controlled information from our convict beginnings. So why is there resistance to new media and cultural change? How can this resistance be overcome and who should lead the charge?

Resistance to new media comes in two major forms. First, the traditional media is struggling to remain relevant. Newspapers throughout the world are the first casualties. Television networks are struggling to keep pace by finding content on the Net faster than their tired old ways can deliver, but new media pundits know this is really yesterday’s news presented as today’s big thing. Telephone companies are trying to squeeze the last drops of value out of their ailing infrastructure. All of these issues will come to the fore with the implementation of the NBN whether policy-makers notice or not—it is inevitable. Second, the sceptics who cannot see the value of high speed broadband. The investment in the NBN is seen by many as a waste of money which would be better spent on health, education, or environmental sustainability. Typically, the sceptics cannot see the value of higher bandwidth because they do not use the technology or they are at loggerheads with the government as part of their political agenda. However, those with genuine concerns about the usefulness of higher bandwidth are often convinced once the potential uses have been demonstrated, something the traditional media has overshadowed with its focus on someone tweeting about ‘what they had for breakfast’.

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Public Sphere 2.0 demonstrated the effective use of higher bandwidth to bring citizens together in meaningful ways. The event was organised in less than a week by Kate Lundy’s office and participants
Public Sphere 2.0 works. It provides an opportunity for policy-makers to harness the knowledge and experience of citizens so that 'the public interest' actually reflects 'the public' and not just 'the interests'. Overcoming resistance to Public Sphere 2.0 will take some time, but it is obvious that politicians must take the lead. Politicians using Public Sphere 2.0 will provide legitimacy for the public sector to come on board. Until this becomes the norm, the bureaucracy’s hands are tied by the old rules. Nonetheless, once citizens have access to higher bandwidth, trying to keep them out of Public Sphere 2.0 will be like holding back the proverbial tide.

Details of the event can be found on Senator Lundy's website at the following link: http://www.katelundy.com.au/2009/04/29/public-sphere-1-high-bandwidth-for-australia/

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