

Sustainability Issues for Australian Rural Teleservice Centres

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INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

The overall economic, social and environmental health of rural communities is one of the critical issues facing Australia. Without access to basic services, a small community can be left with a standard of living more like that of a third world country. Increasingly, services have an electronic component. Convergent digital services can lead to transformative effects, but can also exacerbate existing divides if technologies and the capacity to use them effectively are not available. Teleservice centres have in the past provided many forms of electronic services and training: computing, fax, printers, banking, etc. Today Internet functionality is a central aspect of rural teleservice centres, with broadband a looming issue. This article presents teleservice centres as a strategic national resource. Their potential to contribute to rural sustainability and equitable access to government services means that at every level of community and government, teleservice centres can deliver triple bottom line benefits.

This article is based on research (Geiselhart, 2004) by Community TeleServices Australia Inc (CTSA <http://www.teleservices.net.au>) for the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. In addition to reviewing related research, both Australian and international, the report drew on a set of working papers (<http://www.teleservices.net.au/papers>) prepared by a range of practitioners with wide experience in Australian teleservice centre operation and administration.

The impetus to examine the role of the teleservice centres came from the Regional Telecommunications Inquiry (RTI) Report. In it, Recommendation 5.5 of stated that "All tiers of government should work together to support teleservice centres in regional, rural and remote Australia, and to enable these important community facilities to remain viable."

The CTSA research identified success and failure factors consistent with related research on teleservice centres. International and other Australian perspectives

confirm that it is necessary to consider the interactions between social, economic and environmental goals, and structure government service delivery to achieve synergies and generate transformative "network effects".

BACKGROUND

As of late-2004, the survival of many Australian telecentres hangs in the balance. Of more than 600 teleservice centres opened since the early 1990s, more than a quarter have closed and many others teeter on extinction. While substantial progress has been made towards creating a minimal communication infrastructure in non-metro Australia, this task remains incomplete. An application layer is now needed to support local access and effective use of new technologies.

Regional Australia remains at a disadvantage in many ways. Not only are incomes lower on average than for metro Australia, but also the gap is increasing (ABS Regional Report). Thirty-six of the 40 poorest federal electorates are rural or provincial areas. This in itself makes it more likely that both instability and inequality will grow. Thus, non-metro Australia is less able to pay for the suite of skills and services of the online world, even if they are available. And often they are not, according to the RTI report. One commentator has observed a trend (initially seen in the U.S.) of rural towns becoming low-rent havens for a "new inter-generational underclass" (Firth, 2000). Although research has found that the demand for electronic services grows with the distance from an urban centre (Telecommunication Needs Assessment), market forces do not work well where long term trends indicate inequality is increasing.

Solving these problems is not a trivial task: half the area of the continent contains only 0.3% of the population, and the most densely populated 1% of the continent contains 84% of the population (Year Book Australia, 2002). The dynamics of globalization have seen many inland areas lose their livelihoods, as farms become larger and some small towns disappear or decline, with the

exception of accessible coastal areas (Budge, 1998). Given this situation, the importance of public access to telecommunications services, such as those offered by teleservice centres, is likely to persist indefinitely. The dynamic environment of teleservice centres today includes rapid technology change and changing demographics of regional and rural Australia. There is also heightened awareness of the need for greater responsiveness to catastrophe (cyclones, floods, infrastructure failure) and long term threats both perennial (flood, drought) and current (global climate change and terrorism). Communication technologies embedded in local skills, resources and people can be part of the response.

COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

Current thinking about equity in telecommunications access suggests that effective use of technologies at a local level is more important than provision of infrastructure that is isolated from social context (Gurstein, 2003). This common sense approach is backed up by evaluations and research on teleservice centres from many perspectives. Internationally, a Commonwealth of Learning report (2001) documented many instances of teleservice centre success around the world. Over and over, long term viability depended on finding and responding to community needs with an appropriate and effective level of technological provision.

Best and Maclay (2002) describe a number of interacting factors for the sustainability of rural Internet access. The main ones are costs, revenue, networks, business models, policy, and capacity. They say that in poor rural settings, this access must be seen as a public good, and be delivered as a community rather than a personal resource. It is important to harness network effects and offer appropriate business models. This is consistent with both effective use strategies and a triple bottom line approach.

Within Australia a similar picture has emerged. Due to space limitations, these cannot be discussed in detail. One comprehensive report is the evaluation of the Tasmanian Communities Online program (2003). This describes positive impacts on jobs, education, and general skill levels. Geiselhart (2002) illustrates some synergies that are facilitating the growth of rural digital book production. The same author researched several of the case studies in Australian Communities Online (NOIE, 2002), which also showed how technology can be harnessed for learning communities in holistic ways.

A particularly useful analysis is Goggin (2003). He looked at three representative but diverse small Australian rural areas. He found online services were steadily growing in importance, and there was a strong preference for involvement in relationship formation and maintenance

around communications, and for providers to be accountable or “owned” by the community. Emerging areas of demand include interactive broadband service and reliable high speed data service. He documented the importance of non-government, non-profit groups and the community sector in meeting local community telecommunication needs, and noted that “A dedicated arms-length body, with substantial funding, is likely to provide effective, efficient and practical coordination of local telecommunications initiatives.”

The groups he studied were changing in their demographics. He described some of the emerging groups: the “sea change” customer, the “new lifestyle home business”, the “technology intensive farmer”, the “intentional community”, and the “new cultural institution” of museum-art gallery-tourism. In the current context of declining inland rural incomes, his analysis raises the possibility of a rural low-rent welfare dependent rural group becoming the hired help for a new creative class. This would reinforce the need for teleservice centres where the public can manage their Centrelink payments, and participate in the upward techno-dynamic.

Goggin also looked another area of increasing interest to researchers and governments: the relationship between telecommunications and social capital. He found “Those communities able to best foster social relationships and institutions are also most likely to be able to organise and network themselves to get better access to telecommunications and online services.” This indicates that some communities whose social capital is already depleted will benefit from cross-subsidisation of their public access centres to overcome the widening gaps between rural communities. He found that these access centres were important at a symbolic level also, as they demonstrate that the community is modernizing. He commented on the benefits of a community telco model, and its ability to enter strategic partnerships, as well as the importance of communities getting together to share costs and aggregate demand for bandwidth and other telecommunication services, and for building their “technical, social and economic capacity.”

TELESERVICE CENTRE SUCCESS FACTORS

With the above research and much more as background, the CTSA research identified the following key factors for teleservice centre viability:

- Sufficient community commitment to having a centre
- Presence of a “social entrepreneur” or local leader who understands triple bottom line benefits

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