

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

24/3/2009 – Tim Udorovic

Today, many young Australians are more comfortable in front of a computer than in front of a person.

Shocking, but true. In fact, most of our socialising is now done over the internet. The unprecedented and meteoric rise in the popularity of social networking sites has unveiled just how much the web has become a part of everyday life. It's not just the traditional computer though: mobile phones have now seamlessly interwoven into the ether as well. Not to mention that in the USA people are even able to download entire books (hundreds of thousands of them even) to 'e-readers', the most popular being the Kindle. Our lives are quickly becoming digitally dependent, if they aren't already, and nobody wants to be left behind.

Australians frustrated at relatively slow internet speeds can now breathe slightly easier. Telstra, Australia's largest Internet Service Provider, recently announced a \$300 million upgrade to their cable internet network. The first city to be awarded this significant prize will be Melbourne. The infrastructure enhancement may increase broadband speeds by up to three times and will purportedly reach almost one million Melbourne homes. Relief! Well, partly. Nothing has been said about rural areas, let alone how much it is going to cost to outfit all Australian capital cities. Sol Trujillo, Telstra's outgoing CEO said, 'Now we are going to the next level: super-fast broadband with download speeds among the highest in the world.'

People in Australia will now be able to do everything they could do, and more, much quicker. Of course, the primary reaction is one of delight. But many will wonder if this is necessarily a good thing for young Australians. Facebook pages load almost instantaneously, and delays in streaming audio and video generally are not too bad. The well known arguments will surface once more: obesity is a growing concern; Parents are getting continually more anxious about their child's activities on the internet; Young people don't socialise enough these days. Those issues are valid and indeed concerning. To be frank, the services we rely upon and need the most: e-mail, social networking, audio and video streaming are all performing adequately enough to meet our current needs. Videoconferencing may be lagging, but that shouldn't be much of a concern for most young people!

In the long run, the benefits of faster internet speeds to Australian society far outweigh the perceived drawbacks. It is true that many young people don't exercise enough to burn off the energy they take from food - hence the obesity epidemic. But having a faster internet connection will not mean children will exercise any less. It's illogical to suggest that as a process becomes faster and more efficient, that more time will be devoted to that process. As a society, Australia should be embracing the Web as a tool to help fight these threatening and crucial issues, not seeing it as the cause of the problems. Moreover, the impact to youth is but one small aspect of this news. Businesses will benefit immensely. News websites in particular will be able to increase online video

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footage, as will television channels. Documents that were just too large for an e-mail client to efficiently handle will be able to be sent digitally. The list is a long one.

Aside from these arguments, this move by Telstra is in direct competition with the Rudd Government's National Broadband Network, currently in the process of considering tender offers. Trujillo says, "If per chance the government wants to have a conversation with Telstra about deployment then we'd be willing to have that conversation." This is a direct challenge to the Government – a challenge to see what the competitive private sector has to offer in terms of a national broadband transformation. It is definitely an enticing proposition and one which demands the Government's full attention.

Australian society is already taking big steps forward in the way it uses and perceives the internet. Given that it is so readily available on mobile phones, the Web really is everywhere. According to Telstra, "Next G [Telstra's new mobile network] covers 99 per cent of the population." This all-pervasive presence is impossible to avoid, and so it is only right to welcome and encourage its development and improvement. Indeed, it is often a society's level of technology that defines it as either modern, or not. Why should we let Australia fall behind? Issues such as obesity and the protection of children on the internet remain at the forefront of our minds; however, if we impede the inevitable march of technology, we suffocate Australia's future growth and its standing on the world stage.

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