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The importance of community engagement in policy development: an Australian case study

Alison Norris
University of Wollongong, afreeman@uow.edu.au

Mark Freeman
University of Wollongong, mfreeman@uow.edu.au

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Keywords

importance, community, engagement, policy, development, Australian, case, study

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Alison Norris
University of Wollongong, Australia
anorris@uow.edu.au

Mark Freeman
University of Wollongong, Australia
mfreeman@uow.edu.au

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The Australian Domain Name Administrators have launched a new domain name space designed specifically for community groups to develop community websites for the benefit of the local community. The purpose of the scheme under which these domains are issued is to link community members through community-managed websites, and to encourage broad community participation and engagement. Despite broad community engagement during initial development, many changes have since been made to the policy governing these new domain names. This paper presents an overview of the scheme under which these community domains can be used, and identifies the changes made to the policy since it was initially proposed. A comparison of the proposed and implemented policies, and the community's feedback, is presented. Consideration of the impacts of these changes, made without concern for genuine community engagement, is provided to highlight the importance of community engagement to policy development.

1. Introduction

Community Geographic Domain Names (CGDNs) were publicly launched in Australia in 2006. These new domain names were created to provide a space for community members to develop websites that benefited the entire local community, by linking members of geographic communities and encouraging community participation. Each CGDN conforms to a suburb.state/territory.au format (for example wollongong.nsw.au, ballarat.vic.au) as opposed to the traditional suffixes to which Australian Internet users are accustomed (such as .com.au, .net.au and .gov.au). This format provides a clear and direct relationship between the geography of the community and its associated domain name.

The idea of 'community only' domains was developed from the desire for a facility for communities to identify themselves on the Internet and to alleviate concerns about commercial organisations effectively controlling geographic domains in Australia. The CGDN concept was officially proposed to the Australian Domain Name

Administrators (auDA) by two community groups in 2002. These proposals were developed through extensive consultation with grassroots community groups. In 2003, auDA permitted a trial of these community domain names based on policy and guidelines established in the most comprehensive of the submitted proposals. This trial was promoted as an opportunity to test the policy, gather feedback from participating groups and the community more broadly, and implement modifications based on experiences and feedback. However, from its inception to the national CGDN launch, numerous modifications were made to the policy, guidelines and associated processes without the necessary consideration of community feedback. Community feedback was marginalised and in some cases the changes made were in direct contrast to community advice.

While the initial proposals for 'community only' domains received wide community support, there has been slow uptake of the CGDNs since the national launch in August 2006. This paper will outline key elements of the scheme as it was proposed by members of the community in 2002, and compare these to the final CGDN Policy. An analysis of each change will be presented to highlight the importance of on-going community engagement in policy development.

2. Defining communities

There are varied definitions of community, typically based on geography, an interest or a combination of the two. While there is no agreed definition of a 'community' [1, 2], it has been established that the term refers to a group of individuals. When the term is considered in the context of 'online' communities, the only common concept throughout all definitions is people [3].

When proposing the 'community only' domain names, the concept of community was based on geography. Members of geographic communities are classified as such based on their shared geographical location, or physical proximity to one another [2]. While the term 'community' has often been used to describe a group of individuals within a specific geographical area, use of the term implies (often inaccurately [2]) that these individuals have a shared social base simply because they reside in a similar location. The CGDN Scheme attempts to develop

a shared social base for the community based around geography.

Adler [4], Butcher [2], Day [5] and Stoecker [6] have proposed a variety of definitions for the word 'community', however it has often been claimed that these definitions are concerned with internal community cohesion and do not adequately consider individual commitment and participation [7]. O'Neil [7] argues that an online community can facilitate the re-development of internal social networks and support interaction between community members. The CGDN proposal considered the development of local social networks to be an important goal of the scheme.

Gurstein advises that, while technology projects can be used to enhance community interaction and prosperity, they can also lead to division among community members. To be successful, an online community requires close links to the existing offline economic community, as well as strong leadership able to unite the community as a whole [7]. Achieving this success in the CGDN Scheme requires consideration of the role and concerns of the communities involved in the CGDN trial.

3. The community's role in scheme initiation

Proposals for a new Australian domain name space solely for community use were developed by three separate groups. Each of the proposals that were submitted to auDA outlined the writer's preferred structure and management procedures for these new domains. One proposal was dismissed because of its lack of community focus. The other two proposals, from cBallarat with the City of Ballarat, and the One City One Site (OCOS) Working Party, were very similar [8]. The OCOS Working Party's proposal demonstrated a strong community focus. Based in a regional town, the OCOS Working Party had engaged various stakeholder groups as well as working closely with auDA's Name Policy Advisory Panel and auDA's New Names Advisory Panel [9]. The New Names Advisory Panel were supportive of the concept as it was described in the proposals from OCOS and cBallarat, and gave support to the domain name structure [8].

After consultation with the OCOS Working Party and the New Names Advisory Panel, auDA gave their support to a new domain name space solely for community use. However, it was jointly determined that much of the operational detail of the proposed CGDNs could only be resolved in practice. A National Reference Group was established to manage a trial of these operational processes, and this group assumed responsibility for implementing a trial of the CGDNs [10]. This trial, managed by OCOS, was conducted to ensure that the CGDN Policies were comprehensive, and to provide the opportunity to gather further community feedback before the national release of the new domain names.

3.1. Communities participating in the trial

The trial of the CGDN Scheme involved three communities, each treated as a separate implementation of the Scheme. By using three case studies, rather than only one implementation of the CGDN Scheme, results are more easily generalisable [11]. Observing three communities allowed common experiences to be identified and varied perspectives recorded. Using communities with varied sizes, motivations and support mechanisms meant that the implications of the policy could be seen in different circumstances. The CGDN Scheme trial began in 2004, with the community groups formed between March 2004 and June 2004. Each test case undertook the process of forming a community group, and developing a community website, based on the processes outlined in the CGDN proposal.

The first test case was established in Bathurst, a regional town with 30,000 residents, and was facilitated by the manager of the CGDN Scheme trial. This individual had also been a member of the OCOS Working Party, and had strong ties to key stakeholders in the local community. The second test case was based in the large regional city of Wollongong, which has 200,000 residents, and was facilitated by researchers from the local university. The third test case in the regional city of Ballarat with 85,000 residents was facilitated by cBallarat (an established organisation) in Ballarat.

4. Recording community experiences and feedback

The experiences of the community members participating in the CGDN trial were captured through independent and objective observation using a case study methodology [12]. Case study research is interpretive research [13], and requires that the researcher become familiar with the participants and the environment in which they operate, before analysing "the data for themes or issues" [13]. A case study approach involves detailed research to describe and understand an event, an activity, a process, a program, an individual or a group of individuals (the 'test case') [13, 14] using "a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time" [14]. While each test case must have clear time and activity boundaries [13, 15], it is often difficult to define the boundaries between the test case and its context [12, 16]. This is particularly problematic when test case feedback is used to inform (and potentially alter) the context in which the test case operates. Using a case study approach allowed the issues that impacted on the experiences and success of the three CGDN test cases to be identified within their real-life context, without having to pre-define the boundaries of the research [16].

Data collection and analysis was conducted over a three-year period in a natural setting, and involved 'typical' situations that represented the 'real' experiences of the participants and community [13, 17]. Collected data types included observations, interviews, documents and audiovisual materials (all of which are common in case study research) [12, 13], allowing a detailed image of the test case experiences to be established. Many data sources were used in this study, including: published and unpublished documentation; test case reports; community surveys; meeting transcripts, minutes and observation; interviews with key stakeholders; the researcher's impressions and reactions; private communication; and reviews of the community websites. Many of the sources listed above are used to develop an understanding of the 'inside' perceptions of the individuals involved, and can only be captured through attentiveness to the individuals' speech and behaviour, empathetic understanding, and an ability for the researcher to suspend preconceptions while interacting with the individuals [17]. These sources, in combination, were used to record the experiences of the test case participants and the changes made to the CGDN Policy. This approach of triangulating from multiple sources has been deemed to be the most effective method for evaluating community projects involving information technology [7, 12].

In conjunction with this research, researchers at the University of Wollongong compiled information from all these sources, and reported to auDA on the experiences of the community groups and the researchers' resulting recommendations [18] to ensure that policy makers were aware of community perceptions and feedback prior to formalising policy. The researchers on this paper were members of this University of Wollongong team, and were independent of auDA, OCOS, and the .au Community Domains Trust (auCD).

While previous research in the Community Informatics field has conducted case studies on the development and success of community websites, this is the first research to consider the experiences of multiple communities as each attempts to develop a community website under a defined policy. Recording the experiences and feedback of multiple test cases will add confidence to the findings of this research, and may help to explain why different communities have varied levels of success with their websites [11].

Common concerns and experiences across the three test cases were identified from the comprehensive range of data collected from the communities. This information was used to better understand the issues faced, and develop policy recommendations to minimise such issues. In many cases, the test case participants developed feasible solutions to the issues faced. Many such issues were identified. In the following section, eight major issues relating to, or caused by, the CGDN Policy are discussed.

5. Responding to community experiences and feedback

While the CGDN Scheme trial was promoted as an opportunity to gather feedback from the trial participants, and from the community more broadly, many individuals involved in the trial suggested that the trial served only in the appearance of community engagement. The following sections of this paper report on the proposed implementation of the CGDN Scheme, compared to the version of the CGDN Scheme that was implemented when the domain names were publicly launched in August 2006. Changes relating to eight key concepts of the scheme are reviewed: local focus; sale of geographic com.au and net.au domains; management and licensing; website management groups; marketing and publicity; state and national portals; fourth level domains; and licensing costs. For each of these concepts, community feedback and perceptions are described and the role of this feedback in CGDN policy development is presented.

5.1. Local focus

5.1.1. Community website proposal. Each 'community only' domain name is representative of a geographic location, and the website on each domain was to be used for the support and enhancement of the local community living in the relevant geographic area. Website management groups were to work with local businesses and community groups to maximize the benefits for all involved, and to keep these benefits within the local community. Each website management group would receive assistance from an overarching CGDN management body to establish relationships with local organisations. All websites were to display only local information and advertising.

5.1.2. Final CGDN Policy. The national CGDN management body signed a national sponsorship deal, rather than assisting to local website management groups to build local funding relationships. This national approach was in direct contrast to the 'local community' focus which formed the basis of the proposals.

5.1.3. Community engagement. Members of the trial community groups worked steadily at developing local content and forming agreements for local advertising and funding. The national sponsorship deal was investigated without seeking community feedback, and was signed despite a strong negative reaction from community members who knew about the plan. Community opposition was based on the belief that any such national arrangement was against the local focus of the CGDN scheme. They believed that the resources invested in signing this sponsor should have been used to promote the

CGDN Scheme, thereby assisting each community to gain local sponsors.

5.2. Sale of commercial geographic domains

5.2.1 Community website proposal. The CGDN Scheme was necessary because the registration of domain names in com.au and net.au that used geographic locations was prohibited by auDA. The CGDN Scheme allowed community groups to register domain names that represented their geographical location. auDA supported the CGDN proposal "in order to preserve Australian geographic names for use by the relevant community" [19]. During proposal development, the OCOS Working Group proposed the idea of releasing geographic com.au and net.au domains. Community feedback determined that community members did not support this idea, suggesting it would be too confusing to have both CGDNs and commercial names released at a similar time.

5.2.2. Final CGDN Policy. After approving the CGDN trial, auDA and its associated Boards and Panels renewed discussions about the restrictions on geographic names in the com.au and net.au name spaces. The Geographic Names Board recommended no change to the restrictions in 2002, while the auDA Panel were in favour of removing the restrictions [9]. Despite promoting the value of the CGDNs as having exclusive access to Australian domain names linked to geographic locations, auDA stated that "once a system for community use of geographic domain names is implemented, there is no longer good reason to maintain the restriction on the use of geographic names in com.au and net.au." [20] When the issue was revisited in 2003, the New Names Advisory Panel failed to make a recommendation [21]. In 2005, auDA chose to lift the restrictions on the use of geographic com.au and net.au domain names, and these names were sold at premium prices, prior to the release of the CGDNs.

5.2.3. Community engagement. Formal mechanisms were implemented by auDA to allow an opportunity for members of the public to provide feedback about the sale of geographic com.au and net.au domain names. Members of trial communities, the public, and the Intergovernmental Committee for Geographical Names in Australasia also encouraged auDA to maintain the restrictions [22] and opposed the removal of the restrictions. However, some registrars supported the sale of the domains. Despite overall feedback supporting the restrictions, auDA ignored the community's wishes.

One justification for the sale of these domain names was as a source of funding for the CGDN Scheme. Community members were angry that auDA had chosen to ignore other proposed funding concepts, and that they never received any financial support as a result of the sale of these domain names.

5.3. CGDN management and licensing

5.3.1. Community website proposal. State-based CGDN management bodies, accountable to auDA, were to manage the allocation and use of the CGDNs, conduct marketing campaigns, and assist communities with the application process. After approval by a management body, CGDN applications would be submitted for final approval by a national Independent Assessment Panel [23].

5.3.2. Final CGDN Policy. auDA established the .au Community Domains Trust (auCD) in 2005. auCD is responsible for the management and sale of CGDNs nationally. While described as 'independent', auCD maintains a close relationship with auDA, including shared Board members [24, 25]. There is no documented process for managing the use of active CGDNs.

5.3.3. Community engagement. auCD provided little support to the trial communities, in contrast to the communities' experiences with the OCOS body, which strongly supported all test cases. Community members requested documentation to support them in meeting the extensive CGDN Scheme application requirements, but this was not provided. No significant marketing campaigns have been conducted. It is likely that greater support, as initially proposed, would have increased CGDN uptake.

5.4. Website management groups

5.4.1. Community website proposal. The proposal, and the original terms of the CGDN trial, required the registrant of a CGDN to be a new legally registered, not-for-profit group [19]. It was not possible for an individual or single entity to license a CGDN [19]. At least eight members were required to demonstrate that the group was broadly representative of the local community, having allowed all community members the opportunity to join the applicant group.

5.4.2. Final CGDN Policy. To allow the third proposed community to become a CGDN test case, auDA altered the management group requirements, stating that: "Although geographic domain names are intended to be allocated for community-based, non-commercial use, the registrant does not necessarily have to be a non-profit community organisation. The registrant might be a company or individual acting on behalf of the community. The main consideration is whether there is a sufficient degree of community control over the registrant." [9]

5.4.3. Community engagement. The policy change made to accommodate the third test case in the CGDN trial undermined the proposal requirements, which ensured that CGDNs were limited to use by community groups. The test case managed by an existing organisation (rather than a community group) was the least successful of the three test cases, with low community participation and support.

5.5 Marketing and publicity

5.5.1. Community website proposal. The importance of ensuring public awareness of the CGDNs and maximising their public appeal was highlighted in the proposal. This process required a national marketing campaign, as well as targeted local promotion.

5.5.2. Final CGDN Policy. To coincide with the national launch, a one-week traveling road-show was undertaken. However, no marketing campaigns have been implemented.

5.5.3. Community engagement. CGDN trial participants stated that without a coordinated marketing campaign, they believe that these domains will not achieve a high level of awareness and use. The test cases have struggled to obtain new members due to low community awareness.

5.6. State and national portals

5.6.1. Community website proposal. The proposals recommended the establishment of state/territory portals, to provide a central access point for all CGDNs, used to disseminate information about CGDNs and provide access to customizable materials and resources. Community members also suggested a national portal which would visually depict and provide access to all active CGDNs.

5.6.2. Final CGDN Policy. The final policy did not include any reference to such portals, and auCD is not considering any future development. A listing of active CGDNs is available on the CGDN website.

5.6.3. Community engagement. Despite community members supporting the idea of state/territory and national portals, these concepts were removed from the final CGDN Scheme plan. Each community group is responsible for their own promotion, forcing communities to use their own limited resources, rather than auCD using funds allocated for this purpose.

5.7 Fourth-level domains

5.7.1. Community website proposal. The proposals did not place restrictions on the use of fourth-level domains (sub-domains) (e.g. sport.wollongong.nsw.au).

5.7.2. Final CGDN Policy. Early changes to the policy restricted the creation and use of all sub-domains, however due to a strong negative reaction from test case members, auDA qualified this restriction. While allowed to use fourth-level domains for their own purposes, community website groups "must not create sub-domains within the CGDN for the purpose of issuing them to third parties" [26].

5.7.3. Community engagement. In line with the proposal's expectation that each CGDN would be used to promote the local area, test cases has planned to lease sub-domains to local community groups and businesses, using this as a source of income. Despite numerous approaches by the community to discuss this restriction, no logical explanation was provided by auCD. The Policy changes were not conducted in accordance with auDA procedure, with no public consultation occurring. Based on research by test case facilitators, it is likely that, if challenged, the Policy would not be considered binding.

5.8 Licensing costs

5.8.1. Community website proposal. No specific price for the sale of each CGDN was recommended, however the aim was to minimize the costs for community groups due to their compulsory non-profit status.

5.8.2. Final CGDN Policy. At the time of launch, the cost of licensing a CGDN for 2 years was AU$550 [27]. Three months later, the cost fell to approximately AU$99 [28].

5.8.3. Community engagement. Community members actively lobbied auCD prior to the launch of the CGDNs, advising auCD that the AU$550 licence fee was too high for true start-up non-profit organisations to be able to afford. After launching the CGDNs at a cost of AU$550, auCD was forced to lower the price only three months after launch due to the low uptake.

6. Allowing community engagement to influence policy development

Initial work developing the CGDN Policy in the proposals relied heavily on community engagement, with stakeholder input actively sought, and all public contributions noted and respectfully considered. When the proposals were submitted in 2002, there was broad community support for the concept. However, the

changes made to the CGDN Policy since this time have demonstrated little attention to the concerns of the broader Australian community. Some of these policy changes have been implemented without community engagement, while others were conducted despite community feedback to the contrary. Speculation from various individuals involved in the process suggests that community feedback has been ignored for multiple reasons, including: inability or unwillingness to invest the time and effort required to explore community opinions and ideas; lack of respect for the views of the 'uninformed' public; a desire to maintain full control, and hence a high level of power; and the economic consideration that it was more profitable to provide standard, basic tools than to develop processes and tools specific to this scheme.

While promoted as a 'community' scheme, the community engagement has had little impact on the final policy, and has drastically altered both the spirit and practical implementation of the CGDN Scheme since its inception. As well as minimising the community focus that was the basis for the proposals, auDA and auCD have alienated the community members who have invested their knowledge and skills in the development of this scheme by marginalising their input. The community groups involved in the trial have stated that their feedback has been ignored, and that the CGDN Policy changes (e.g. the sale of the com.au and net.au domains) have been implemented to suit the administrators rather than considering the interests of the communities. auDA and auCD's ability to pursue activities not aligned with the initial goals of the CGDN Scheme may be attributable to their independence, acting as a largely self-regulating body rather than being held accountable to any external entity.

Despite the lack of value attributed to community input when altering the CGDN Policy, auCD continues to suggest that "this new initiative can overcome isolation and bring communities together to function and interact as a cohesive group using the World Wide Web" [29]. Over 27,000 domain names are available to Australian communities under the CGDN Scheme, however only 22 of these CGDNs were active 16 months after the national launch [30]. This represents 0.0008% of the available CGDNs, demonstrating the extremely low uptake of these domains. Some of the reasons for this low uptake have been highlighted in this paper, with community members suggesting that the changes made to the proposed CGDN Policy have decreased the value of the CGDNs.

7. Conclusion

The original proposals for 'community only' domain names presented a concept with the potential to create authentic local community presences on the Internet, using a domain name space protected from commercial interests. With strong community support and genuine community engagement, the proposals provided a comprehensive depiction of such a domain name space and were built on the desire to enhance social inclusion of all members of a geographical community. However, the lack of ongoing community engagement and interaction resulted in changes to the CGDN Policy that have potentially reduced the community benefit of this scheme, and these changes may ultimately lead to the failure of the CGDN Scheme.

This study has reported on changes made to the CGDN Scheme between its inception in 2002 and national launch in 2006, based on extensive data collection across three case studies. Changes to the policy without regard for community feedback are likely to be a significant reason for the low uptake of the CGDNs. To date, only 22 communities in Australia have signed up for this scheme which has the potential to affect thousands of communities throughout the country. Unless further attempts at genuine community engagement are successfully undertaken, and the results of this community engagement translated into policy, the CGDN Scheme will remain unable to meet community needs. The experiences recorded from the CGDN Scheme highlight the importance of genuine and reciprocal interest between community participants, researchers and law makers.

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