

2006

**An examination of the sustainability of online communities in Australia:  
including the findings of participatory action research undertaken on a Beta  
3rd generation network type regional community portal in New South Wales**

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**TITLE SHEET**

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE SUSTAINABILITY OF ONLINE  
COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRALIA INCLUDING THE FINDINGS  
OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN ON  
A BETA 3<sup>RD</sup> GENERATION NETWORK TYPE REGIONAL  
COMMUNITY PORTAL IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

\* A thesis submitted in (partial) fulfilment of the requirements  
for the award of the degree

**MASTER OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS - RESEARCH**

from

**UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG**

by

**ANDREW CONNERY**

**SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS**

**2006**

## **THESIS CERTIFICATION**

### **CERTIFICATION**

I, Andrew Connery, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Information Systems, in the School of Economics and Information Systems, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

.....  
Andrew Connery

Date:.....

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## **0.0 ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the operations and viability of community portals (RCP) generally and within Australia specifically. It records and analyses, through participatory action research undertaken by the candidate, the development of a beta 3<sup>rd</sup> generation network type community portal (NCP). The particular aspect of interest in this community portal is that it is a commercial venture aimed at achieving long-term economic sustainability.

The evolution of portals can be traced back to the origins of the internet. As a group they can be classified into three broad categories: internet, intranet and extranet. In this thesis it is assumed that a community portal is a further subgroup of the internet type portal, with a regional community portal has the added attribute of being geographically prescribed in essence. Whilst it is freely accessible to any web user, it is only of continuing interest or amenity to persons residing in a specific area or community. The research presented here focuses on the development of communities that are essentially web-based but are situated in, and serve the needs of, a bounded local region. The capability of the Web to enable the creation and sustaining of communities is becoming increasingly more common for a wide range of activities, which can be in the commercial as well as non-profit or educational sectors. The problem of the sustainability of web-based communities, and regional community portals in particular, is now a widespread phenomenon, and is capturing the interest of researchers in many disciplines in academia and the professions. There is an increasing need for these communities to be commercially viable and demonstrate return on investment in a pragmatic sense.

In conducting the research three models were investigated as a precursor to the development and design of the research method for this thesis. The alternatives reflect the researcher's business and academic background. The research approach also justifies a model of portal sustainability developed with colleagues at the University of Wollongong.

This study has found overwhelming evidence that the widespread introduction and on-going operation of 'not for profit' community portals in Australia has been universally compromised by lack of skilled management, an absence of long term financial support and a scarcity of relevant technological expertise.

Even well funded government initiatives, both state and federal (2000 onwards), in line with the overseas experience (UK & Canada) have been mostly unsuccessful. The technical complexity and rate of change in technology has in many instances hidden more fundamental underlying structural problems inherent with the operation of regional community portals undertaken to date. As in some other traditionally community based services, most significantly after hours child care the introduction of a ‘community’ front end and ‘corporate’ backend business models seems to be the solution now being favoured by governments over more orthodox approaches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is meeting a growing market need in a time of increasing pressure on dwindling public resources to maintain existing service levels.

The study identifies structure, ownership and the business model as the most critical issues for achieving sustainability. The research confirms that the emergence of regional community portals into the mainstream coincides with the most turbulent economic time the mass media and telecommunications companies have ever encountered in this country. This context has severely hampered their introduction by diverting attention to the survival of the traditional forms of media rather than exploring inherently more efficient content delivery systems which have the potential to negatively impact the incumbent proprietors’ older technologies and strong revenue streams.

This research points to a future in which numerous and as yet unimagined new technologies will be developed for the gathering and sharing of information using the internet platform. Web based communities or social networks are becoming the online phenomena of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and regional community portals are the natural home for such activities.