Local Public Broadband – the Missing Link in Australia's Broadband Debate?

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Imagining broadband

- "Municipal Wi-Fi networks should be seen as council business of the 21st century as much as roads, rubbish and drains were for the 20th century."
  Cr Greco, City of Darebin,
  MAV Macarthur Fellowship Research Report, 2009

- "It can be said that, as a driver of economic development in the 21st century, communications infrastructure is as important as roads and railways were in the 19th century."

  ALGA: *State of the Regions Report 2005-06*

- "We've argued for some time [broadband] has essentially become the fourth utility after water, gas and electricity."

  Communications Minister Conroy, *ABC Lateline*, 7 April 2009

Municipal broadband

- "Developed by municipal governments, private providers or public-private partnerships, these networks are intended to serve the connectivity needs of local residents, tourists and business travellers."

  - Catherine Middleton, Ryerson University, 2007

International developments

- 1,000 + local networks

- optical fibre, cable, copper wire, Wi-Fi, Wi-Max

- direct and indirect municipal support

- partnerships, diverse ventures: Google, GigU

- community wireless networks

- mesh technologies lowering entry barriers

- anchoring and co-ordination through 'MUSH' networks

Rationales for municipal investment

- equity & digital inclusion, in response to state & higher government failure

- service & infrastructure efficiencies (eg. leveraging existing utility infrastructure & business assets, or 'back office' networks)

- civic engagement & community building

- economic development & local innovation

- safety & security

- urban competitiveness

Criticism of municipal investment

- quality of service

- unsustainable business models

- mismatch with user needs

- risk (financial, regulatory)

- digital exclusiveness

- limited evaluation

Australia by contrast

- spatial and demographic challenges

- 'weak' vs 'strong' local jurisdictions: municipal networks correlate with local utility provision

- legacy of public telecommunications monopoly

- different patterns of housing and civil governance

- limited 'bottom-up' organisation to promote affordable

- little community wireless activism

Arguing for local public broadband

- interconnection of physical and digital infrastructure

- local innovation and experimentation

- public utility or public park?

- local governance and community service provision

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