The Digital Review of Asia-Pacific 2003-2006

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Abstract

This is a subjective view of the experience of contributing to the Digital Review of Asia-Pacific. Participation in this process, from 2003-6, permitted a unique opportunity to share perspectives across a wide range of cultural, technological and economic settings. As the Australian author I found myself responding in unexpected ways to the information being offered by other national representatives. For example, the human rights implications of some restrictions by nation-states in the Asia-Pacific were keenly felt by all group members, but could not be mentioned in ways that explicitly criticised the authorities concerned. In many nations of the Asia-Pacific the issue is not only one of content-produced in local languages, but also one of having the appropriate fonts in which to produce local content. Finally, the same technology, such as wireless broadband, is being used for very different purposes in different countries. This article reflects critically upon the value of an intensive and personal exposure to a range of different countries and cultures united in a geo-political global region but with such a wide divergence of political, social, economic, technological and religious identities.

Introduction

This article provides a background to the *Digital Review of Asia Pacific*, which started in 2003, and which is published every two years. The third volume, 2007/8 is in press. Detailed specifics of the *Review* are followed by discussion of my personal experience of writing for the volume, as the chapter author for 'Australia', and of the experience of learning through interaction with other chapter authors; with the editorial team, and with the Chief Editor, Chin Saik Yoon (the Publisher and Managing Director of Southbound). This is a necessarily personal reflection since my experiences differed greatly from many of my co-authors. The article progresses to discuss some indicative differences in the digital environments of countries in the Asia Pacific region as revealed by the *Review* and finishes with some conclusions.

The *Digital Review of Asia-Pacific*, http://www.digital-review.org/, (DiRAP n.d.) has a complex list of publication credits reflecting both the inclusiveness and the cost of the endeavour. Canada is – perhaps unsurprisingly, given its commitment to development scholarship – the locus of two key contributing organisations: the Pan Asia Networking Programme, International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Ottowa, Canada; and the Orbicom Network of UNESCO Chairs in Communications, Montreal (ORBICOM), which provides the base for the overall Publisher of the work, Professor (and Vice-Rector, University of Quebec) Claude-Yves Charron. The third copyright holder in the works, and the UN-funded Asia-Pacific based partner, is the Asia-Pacific Development Information Programme, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP-APDIP). In addition to holding the copyright in the two volumes so far published these

three organisations are co-publishers with a fourth organisation – Penang-based Southbound (Malaysia) – which provides the design, typesetting and printing, and the chief editor (for the 2005/6 edition) Mr Chin Saik Yoon (also Publisher and Managing Director of Southbound). The editorial board represents the individuals whose vision realised the DiRAP, who also represent the key funding organisations. Other grants and contributions are acknowledged on an DiRAP volume by volume basis.

The rationale behind DiRAP is available on the web as one of the projects of UNDP-APDIP: http://www.apdip.net/projects/dig-rev (APDIP 2005). Here we learn that the project's specific objectives are:

- To provide a one-stop reference source on the state-of-practice and future trends in ICTs for development and ICTs for industry for the Asia-Pacific region;

- To serve as a comparative, analytical tool for policy and decision-makers, technology practitioners and experts, researchers and educators in the region;

- To strengthen the research capacity of key Southern ICT partners by developing their skills in collecting, analysing, synthesizing, publishing and marketing content;

- To enable Northern and Southern researchers to cooperatively build a needed, shared data resource, and

- To complement the Digital Divide Index effort, being undertaken by Orbicom, as a monitoring tool for evaluating the e-environments of Asia-Pacific countries.

- To conceptualise and test a sustainable business model for selling online the Digital Review in an electronic format to developed country readers, while at the same time providing it free-of-cost to key policy-makers, researchers, practitioners and libraries in the developing countries of the region.

- To build and nurture a core group of Asian researchers and writers to systematically review, analyse, forecast and report on ICT issues in the Asia Pacific Region on a regular basis. (APDIP 2005)

My role in DiRAP is as the national author representing Australia (although for 2007/8 I share national-author credit with Dr Axel Bruns, editor of *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* [M/C n.d.]), and as the first author of a thematic chapter for the 2005/6 edition: 'Social, political and cultural aspects of ICT: E-governance, popular participation and international politics'. The APDIP (2005) policy document summarised my role as one of "a panel of contributors comprising both members of the academe and industry, who are already conducting on-going periodic reviews of the countries of their coverage. They will be provided with a template and style sheet to guide their preparation of contributions to the publication" (APDIP 2005).

My experience of participating in DiRAP: the writing

The vision for the *Digital Review* was to allow a reader to compare digital uptake and adoption across the Asia Pacific. Accordingly, every author had a country-specific panel to complete which allowed ready comparison of relative digital engagement and capacity-building. For example, the *Australia facts* table addressed (Green 2003, p. 29): Population; Rural population as % of total population; Key economic sectors; Literacy in the national language(s); Literacy in English; Computer ownership per 100 inhabitants; Telephone lines per 100 inhabitants; Internet hosts per 10,000 inhabitants; Internet cafes/telecentres per 10,000 inhabitants; Internet users per 100 inhabitants; Cell phone subscribers per 100 inhabitants; Number of websites in the national language(s); National bandwidth within the country; National bandwidth to and from the country; Ratio of incoming and outgoing Internet traffic volume. The 269 references I used in this chapter (ibid, pp. 42—6) indicate both that I several times had to stray away from areas in which I felt confident and charted my progress through rigorous citation, and also that I made extensive use of web-based information to source relevant data. I was consequently dismayed when the editors introduced a new rule for the following volume (to limit references to 20)!

The comparative ease of access I had to digital resources to research and write my chapter, and the unbelievable advantage of being allowed to write in my mother tongue, meant that my experiences of contributing to the publication of DiRAP 2003/4 (and DiRAP 2005/6), differed from that of most of my fellow authors. I soon became aware of the extraordinarily privileged situation I was in: additionally, there was a lot to write about. Australia is a very fortunate country in terms of digital investment and infrastructure. While it may lag behind, for example: Hong Kong, India, Japan, Korea, New Zealand and Singapore, depending upon the indicator chosen, it was almost always possible to find something to say about each of the suggested headings and subheadings provided for the chapter structure. I'm delighted to say that Australia did not have the longest chapter in that first volume, however – there was more to say about Singapore.

The 2005/6 volume was able to respond to the feedback of readers and user-groups who had had access to 2003/4. In addition to the 29 individual nations represented (Iran and Maldives had joined the team of national authors), there were three subregional groupings (ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] and APEC [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation] joined the Pacific Islands). All chapters outlined the nation's, or the subgrouping's response to ICT opportunities. Further, there were four 'theme chapters', three of which had multiple authors largely drawn from the pool of national authors. These teams were self-selecting but managed to combine a wealth of differing perspectives. The thematic chapter that I worked on ('Social, political and cultural aspects of ICT: E-governance, popular participation and international

politics'), for example, included an author each from Iran, Dr Masoud Shafiee; Malaysia, Associate Professor Zaharom Nain, and the Phillipines, Dr Emmanuel C. Lallana as well as myself.

A further innovation in the 2005/6 volume, and one that replaced (at that time) the individual country's ICT *facts*, was a diagrammatic representation of the country's relative access in 2003 to a range of ICTs and development indicators. This 2003 indicator was visually compared (by means of an indicative scale) with that of the same country in 1995, and with the global average of access for 2003. The work of compiling this visual representation of the global-wide digital state of play had been a major project for Orbicom in the years leading up to 2003 (Sciadas 2003). It was chastening to realise how much a country such as Australia differed from the norm, dwarfing the usual reference points which were so indicative for so many other countries in the DiRAP volume. (Although the 2007/8 volume has yet to be published, a table equivalent to the country facts has been re-established, so it may be that both sets of information have been found to be useful.)

A further innovation for the second volume was the introduction of up to two 'side-bars' per country chapter: one of these offered a success to be celebrated (and possibly adapted by other countries into other circumstances) and the other was an opportunity to offer a cautionary tale. In the case of Australia, the celebration was of the Western Australian Telecentre Network. Although my PhD had focused on the impacts of broadcast services to remote Western Australia, and although I knew something of the value placed upon the services by Australians living in rural and regional communities, I had to travel to Kuala Lumpur (2003), and Jakarta (2005) to realise that Western Australian policy makers had provided a telecommunications-access model of international significance. Many of my co-authors wanted to know more about this network of centres, and it made for an easy choice of topic for the Australian 'side-bar of success'. As for my cautionary tale, I didn't have to look much further than Australian/US free trade agreement – which was being finalised as I wrote. While the ostensible aim was free trade, one effect was to align further the Australian copyright environment (50years) with that of the US, by increasing to 70 years copyright protections for US properties in Australia. The nett impact, far from freeing trade in information and culture, was to make it more restrictive. The Australian open source movement was also bitterly (and unsuccessfully) opposed to the changes which were rushed through the Australian parliament.

My experience of participating in DiRAP: the learning

The original commitment by the three publishers – the Pan Asia Networking Programme, IDRC; Asia-Pacific Development Information Programme, UNDP, and Orbicom – was to fund two volumes of the publication in the expectation that the third and subsequent volumes would become self-financing as a result of sales of

the books and subscriptions to the regularly-updated website. Although the authors are not business partners – and not privy to the financial success (or otherwise) of the enterprise – it is exciting that a third volume is in press and that the model appears sustainable. As mentioned, one aim of the project was to: "To build and nurture a core group of Asian researchers and writers to systematically review, analyse, forecast and report on ICT issues in the Asia Pacific Region on a regular basis" (APDIP 2005). The project development finances allowed the nurturing of the core group of authors to occur in an exemplary way.

Firstly, the authors represented no uniformity of background. Some were IT academics – usually from the systems management/technical areas (while I was from the humanities) – but this was not overwhelmingly the case. Many were policy experts and advisers to their respective governments. Some were IT entrepreneurs with international networks and connections, operating as one of few 'digital entry points' to their economies. A few were professionals committed to a development agenda, whose experience of wealthy economies (coupled with their commitment to their adopted homes) enabled them to experience the digital divide in a way that highlighted the potential benefits of supporting community-based IT initiatives. A number of authors had written policy articles, and a few had a background in journalism, but for most of the chapter authors English was a second or subsequent language.

The author gatherings – Kuala Lumpur (2003, during Ramadan), and Jakarta (2005) – were characterised by a reviewing of the draft chapters and by discussion in small groups of the issues arising. For example, a 'regional grouping' within Asia Pacific places Australia and New Zealand together with Timor-Leste (East Timor), Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Pacific Islands. Alphabetical positioning unites Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Bhutan and China with Hong Kong. It was almost impossible for a grouping not to reveal a wealth of new information and perspectives. Typically the group began with a round table exchange of backgrounds and perspectives (we had generally come to be our country's chapter-author by a variety of ways) and then got down to a nitty-gritty discussion: what were the biggest challenges confronting 'ICT4D' (the deployment of ICTs for development) in our area? Given that the challenges had been identified, were any other countries aware of strategies to address these challenges that had worked?

In addition to the 'assigned' groupings, which took up perhaps half of the round-table time, the authors arranged themselves on other occasions according to groupings of interest. These included such critical issues as 'fonts'. Until that point I hadn't realised the double-difficulty of promoting digital culture in a country with low levels of mother tongue literacy and no standardised fonts for developing websites in that language. Thus Bhutan (for example) in 2003 was working with Microsoft engineers to develop a standard Dzongkha font in Unicode. At that stage there were no websites in the national language. The 2005/6 Digital Review Bhutan chapter reports that the first Bhutanese website was launched on January 9, 2004. "The initiative is hampered by low technology and the lack of a standardised font in the national language.

Visitors to the website will notice that the pages are made up of large image files imported into HTML tags. This is not the ideal way, but it seems to be the best available option for the moment". (Pradhan 2005, p. 83). The site is at: http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/index-dz-a.htm.

In contrast to the vigorous discussion taking place on fonts, I was involved in an exchange about wireless broadband. In Australia, recent changes to legislation had caught up with the fact that domestic wireless broadband should not fall under legislation which required all broadcasters to hold a licence. Privileged Australian families were installing wireless broadband to allow multiple family members simultaneous access to the Internet (in whichever domestic location they preferred: often in front of the television) thus preventing the squabbling over whose turn it was on the Internet-connected computer. This use of wireless contrasted with an Indonesian example of a grass-roots solution to the high cost of Internet access "using off-the-shelf WiFi equipment that was adapted locally to build affordable neighbourhood broadband networks" (Pradhan et al 2005, p. 5). These access-innovators had gone on to explore "alternative regional networks in the country, using either a satellite backbone or the fibre/microwave backbone of cellular operators" (ibid, p. 5). Clearly, Australia's debates had less to contribute to the ICT4D discussions than Indonesia's.

As well as engaging in arranged (and in self-selected) groups, the country authors were also involved in wide-ranging seminar discussions and debates with the Editorial Board and the Publishers (and their representatives and policy makers). Sometimes this was at the residential/work/conference venue where we were meeting: sometimes it was as part of a field trip to explore local initiatives (such as the Cyberjaya, in Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor [MSC]), and a locally-run and user-serviced cybercafe in downtown Jakarta. Importantly, the learning continued after the face-to-face round tables since every author had to review and offer feedback on at least two other revised chapters (and had to respond to feedback offered) as well as working with 'external' reviewers who represented the perspectives of key stake-holders (such as policy-makers and IT developers).

The elephant in the room in any discussion of Internet access and information exchange in the Asia Pacific was the vastly different political perspectives of the countries concerned when it came to concepts such as those labelled in the West as 'free speech' and 'holding governments to account'. All country authors were required to undertake that conversations and opinions shared openly in the sessions remain private, and were not to be recorded or repeated. While many of the differences in perspective can be traced back to a philosophical belief in whether the rights of the individual should take precedence over the rights of the group (or not) it soon became clear that a (Western country-based) web-search would be an easier and fairer method for gaining specific information about ICTs, human rights and civil liberties. Relevant sites include Amnesty International (http://www.amnesty.org), Human Rights Watch (http://www.hrw.org),

International PEN Writers in Prison (http://www.internationalpen.org.uk/index.php?pid=4) and the International Federation of Journalists (http://www.ifj.org/default.asp?Language=EN).

Indicative differences in ICT environments in the Asia Pacific

The *Digital Review* is replete with details of the ICT environment for the Asia Pacific nations involved. Those who wish to access specific details about particular nations are encouraged to pre-order the 2007/8 volume now (DiRAP n.d.), and to obtain a hard copy of the 2005/6 volume (which is bundled with a searchable CD-Rom of the 2003/4 volume). Additionally, or alternatively, a number of web resources are available on the *Digital Review* site: http://www.digital-review.org/. Whereas the individual country chapters necessarily concentrate on the country of interest and thus do not engage in comparative analysis, there are contexted comparisons within the themed chapter section of the 2005/6 volume. The raw material for these over-arching chapters is generally sourced from previously-published information, and thus broadly reflective of the situation prior to 2005. The chapters were multiply-authored (apart from the one on Internet governance), predominantly by country-chapter writers who could bring their own perspectives to bear. The four themes addressed were:

- Building information societies: Bridging the digital divide in Asia Pacific
- Internet governance: Urgent issues for Asia Pacific
- Social, political and cultural aspects of ICT: E-governance, popular participation and international politics
- Appropriate ICT for Asia Pacific: Opting for open source, localization, internationalization and free access.

The flavour of one theme chapter can be gauged by this excerpt from 'Social, political and cultural aspects of ICT' (Green et al 2005, p. 32), which looks at the nature of information poverty and argues that it is a two-edged sword:

> Not only is there a lack of access for the poor as consumers of information and communication products, but there is a corresponding lack of access for the poor as producers of such products – and no realistic editorial control over the content produced by information-powerful others. The information rich countries control the representations of the information poor, and select images congruent with pre-existing perceptions and prejudices. A similar dynamic can be seen to operate when considering the situation of the relatively information-poor population groups and societies in any country: they control neither the agenda nor the content of public debates. In Loas, for example, government agencies in the provinces have had to use floppy disks to send information

collected in the regions to the capital for processing, while telephone density in Myanmar has been estimated at less than 1 percent. [Unchanged in 2005/6] This digital divide, both inside the country and between poor and rich countries, has obvious implications for the future development of ICT, particularly if a government does not commit itself to providing universal communication access (as a right, regardless of commercial viability). This situation contrasts almost obscenely with Australia, where so much emphasis is put on the web delivery of government services that those without access queue for long periods, or make long telephone calls, to gain equivalent information.

The information rich – at the level of the household, and of the nation – are wealthy according to a range of indicators, and are likely to be perceived as rich as well as information rich. It may not be technology access that makes them rich; instead, their technology access may be only one of a number of traits, a privilege that reveals wealth rather than confers it. Arguably, most of the information rich in consumer societies are ignorant of the lives and aspirations of people they class as information poor, and the information poor have few opportunities to communicate back to them as equals in a discussion about rights and responsibilities. In some nations, such as Timor-Leste, the comparative lack of Internet-connected computers is only one of numerous challenges facing the country.

Conclusion

Sadly for those of us involved in contributing chapters to the *Digital Review*, it looks as though the original structural model (involving a week in the company of other authors) may not be sustainable in the long-term. The 2007/8 volume has not been written with the benefit of this inter-author interaction. While there is some talk of a launch of the new volume to which authors will be invited; dates, details and costings are sketchy. Notwithstanding changes in the processes of producing the volume, the information in it remains as detailed, as intriguing and as valuable as ever. It is time that the initiative was duplicated in other regions of the world – Europe, for example – and that the key founding objective of enabling "Northern and Southern researchers to cooperatively build a needed, shared data resource" took international form (APDIP 2005). It would be great to arrive at a point where various *Digital Reviews* representing regions from around the world collaborated to create a global picture of how nations and economies are responding to the online environment.

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