

‘THROUGH COUNTRY WOMEN’: A PROPOSAL FOR THE CWA’S ROLE IN RURAL CONNECTIVITY

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Elected on the platform that it will advance Australia towards a digital economy, the new Federal Labor Government has committed to providing high-speed internet coverage to 98% of Australian households.¹ As the official policy description explains, a Fibre To The Node (FTTN) network will enhance internet connectivity and ‘increase speed to a minimum of 12 megabits per second – so fast that household entertainment, business communication and family services will happen in real time’ (ALP). While advice has been sought on ways to implement the ‘improved broadband services’ promised for the remaining 2% of the population², the broadband roll-out is largely mandated by the activities and needs of a metropolitan dweller, and more specifically, the needs of a young, video-streaming, multi-platform viewing demographic living in family households with several people online. This was the consensus among industry players and academic commentators at the recent *Creating Value: Between Commerce and Commons* conference at Brisbane’s Exhibition and Convention Centre in June 2008 and is mirrored in Telstra advertising campaigns of 2007–8 featuring happy families of simultaneous surfers claiming: ‘We all get on when we can all get on’. This paper challenges the implications of this metropolitan archetype in order to establish some new research priorities that can assist broadband provision and take-up in rural and regional Australia.³ It suggests that the suburban nuclear family is an inadequate model for technology use across the country as a whole and that consideration needs to be given to the range of civic organizations that are equipped to assist the Government’s efforts to promote rural connectivity. Our key example in this paper, the Country Women’s Association, itself relies on a network model to provide significant community support for residents of rural areas. As we will argue, its lengthy involvement in lobbying for telecommunications infrastructure over its 80 year history and its ongoing role at the heart of rural life makes it a fitting advocate to act on behalf of the particular requirements of rural constituencies elaborated below.

¹ At the time of writing, the date for this pledge to be fulfilled was still 2013, despite strong industry scepticism in the wake of various failed alliances in the private sector bidding process and Telstra’s ambiguous behaviour in releasing key data. Indeed departing Telstra Group Director of Public Policy and Communications Phil Burgess claimed on 29 August 2008: ‘I don’t know if it’s going to be built, frankly’ (Kelly 2008).

² A list of submissions is available online at: http://www.dbcde.gov.au/communications_and_technology/consultation_and_submissions/regional_broadband_solutions/public_submissions_on_policy_and_funding_initiatives_to_provide_enhanced_broadband_to_rural_and_remote_areas

³ In this paper we will use the terms rural and regional interchangeably, for the purposes of highlighting the need to think beyond the normative model of an urban dwelling broadband user. However, we would want to make much more of these distinctions in future writing. The study we propose in conclusion will be specifically designed to emphasise the variation in experiences across regional, rural and remote districts and why this matters for policy.

Achieving 98% coverage will by necessity include *some* rural and regional communities, just as it will leave *some* metropolitan and suburban consumers paying more for internet services than others without state-based interventions. The shifting goalposts for the public-private broadband partnership over the past year (More 2007; Hart 2008; Conroy 2008) attest the pragmatic difficulties of getting regional/rural users and households online, but lately these issues have been compounded by the fact that drought and other economic concerns such as fuel prices have changed the priorities of many residents. Recent climate patterns have highlighted the precariousness constantly affecting the already seasonal nature of work like farming. With budgets increasingly stretched, communication resources are a luxury that many cannot afford, and the hidden bias of broadband pricing—which offers contracts of 18 or 24 months to prevent brand shift—is just one instance of the way households with stable incomes and clear pathways to pay-cheques are favoured in technology roll-out. Such schemes offer little flexibility for households whose incomes might be tied to a host of other factors: climate, rainfall, the value of the Australian dollar and the US wheat glut, among others.

The rationalization of mobile telephony spectrum and the eventual shut-off of CDMA mobile coverage to rural Australia in April 2008 has placed further tension on communications service deliveries (Sainsbury 2008; Bardon & Cussons 2008). Despite advertising from service providers strategically depicting contented farmers using mobile phones, rural communities have in fact had to lobby consistently and adamantly to retain existing services that were working and in some cases no longer do (eg. CWA NSW 2007). Of course, rural and regional Australian households have a long and complicated history when it comes to connectivity and telecommunications, whether in the provision of electricity, radio, fixed line telephony, television and more recently mobile telephony and the internet. Services designed for urban Australia, both in terms of technology and business models, have been scaled out to cover the ‘rest’ of Australia with mixed results, with legislative and government agenda displaying cultural ideologies reflecting the centrality and importance of Australia’s non-urban populations and settings (Baum, O’Connor & Stimson 2005; Davison and Brodie 2005). During the Telstra sell-off the large rural voting base for the Coalition Liberal-National Government ensured that non-metropolitan concerns were at least considered; indeed the range of initiatives targeted to this sector (the Higher Bandwidth Incentive Scheme (HiBIS), the Co-ordinated Communications Infrastructure Fund (CCIF), the *Connect Australia* package) fit oddly with popular media representations trumpeting the conveniences and pleasures of being connected. In the metro-centric marketing of new media technology the bush and the outback are shown as places for urban dwellers to visit on holiday or on weekends and still keep up to date with football results, rarely as resident nodal points and households in their own right.⁴

However, government initiatives struggle to recognise that coverage itself cannot overcome gaps in age, gender, occupation and life experience which combine to make online connectivity desirable. What may be typical work and leisure patterns and therefore a successful service for a young family living in inner-city Brisbane, Sydney or Melbourne may actually appear strange if not also undesirable to residents in Mt Isa, Orange or Zeehan. Case

⁴ Telstra mobile phone campaigns have depicted a family camping trip with sports results and television available on the device, and this year Bigpond’s Olympics coverage led advertising campaigns showing signal availability in remote locations and new forms of social activity as a result. Over the past year Telstra wireless cards were advertised via a transient touring family using country infrastructure from a ubiquitous Volkswagen Combi van. The rehashed jingle ‘I’ve Been Everywhere Man’ updated a folk classic for modern commercial purposes.

studies reveal just how much research is required to register the range of environmental, employment and educational factors contributing to the *different* needs of those living in a range of coastal, inland, growing, declining, affluent, struggling, remote and built-up areas (Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts 2007). In what follows we want to offer an example of the kind of forward-looking investment in research that is necessary to provide longitudinal data on country life and its changes from a range of disciplinary perspectives.⁵ Research that is conducted at a slower speed than government and advertising promotions can provide answers to the cultural factors behind key questions of technology adoption, such as: what has made 'connectivity' meaningful in the past? with whom? who were the drivers in the take-up of previous 'new' technologies? and what social or economic factors generated a tipping point? Answers to these questions will be crucial to ensuring the Government's broadband agenda can be delivered.

From demand-driven to top-down provision

Before the current focus on internet technology it was often up to rural communities themselves to lobby for Federal attention to communications infrastructure, attracting top-up funding for local efforts once a proof of concept was established (eg. CWA 1963; 1964). But the high-speed broadband mandate is the latest example of a trend towards top-down policies forcing essential civic services online—the natural extension of an economic agenda seeking to spread the *obvious* benefits of digital and wireless connectivity. The benefits of such connectivity are increasingly debated, from Sally Wyatt's (1999) early work with Britain's internet drop-offs to the reflections of our own research participants who are ambivalent about the improvements in daily life brought with online technologies. Gregg (2008) discusses how working-age, city-dwelling broadband users in information jobs rely on home networks to stay on top of growing workloads brought about by new online technologies, with computer use starting to impact on family relationships. This suggests there may actually be an inchoate labour politics stemming from *over-connectivity* in some cases; for stressed-out office workers, lacklustre communication services in country areas are often a welcome excuse to avoid a constant flow of email contact—to genuinely get away from it all.

Prior to the current mandate, online access centres established in the late 1980s and early 1990s as part of the \$250 million Federal Government *Networking the Nation* package led to more than 1700 public internet access sites across regional, rural and remote Australia. But with complicated funding arrangements involving Local, State and Federal bureaucracies, reports concluded that centres 'need to be owned, planned, resourced and implemented in partnership with other key stakeholders, including government, community groups, business and industry sectors' (Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts 2005: 10). Similarly, in their project investigating Learning, Evaluation, Action and Reflection for New technologies, Empowerment and Rural Sustainability (LEARNERS), Participatory Action Researchers June Lennie, Greg Hearn, Lyn Simpson and Megan Kimber noted that 'factors such as limited funding and resources and the small, highly scattered populations in Australian rural areas' posed problems for sustainable ICT initiatives:

In addition, rural communities often rely on enthusiastic champions and volunteers to successfully maintain initiatives such as community websites. However, since many of

⁵ Recently funded projects, such as Catherine Driscoll's *Australian Country Girlhood* – an ARC Discovery grant incorporating ethnography, policy analysis, contemporary cultural analysis and oral history, and recent initiatives in Rural Cultural Studies pioneered through the ARC Cultural Research Network (2005-) – are suggestive of the research directions we encourage.

these volunteers are already overcommitted with other responsibilities or may eventually leave the community, this situation may not be sustainable (Lennie et al. 2005: 15).

So while access points and skills transfer have gone some way to improving perceived inequities in internet use, reflections from facilitators acknowledge the limitations of a parachute approach. The need for locally-based intermediaries for communication technologies is clear, with previous programs serving to demonstrate that the terms of engagement must be better designed to address digital literacy's uneven spread across age, gender and geography (McWilliam, Hartley & Gibson 2008; Franklin et al. 1994; Grace 1994).

We suggest the shortcomings of rural ICT endeavours are almost inevitable under a funding framework that assumes country users are on the 'other' side of the digital divide, their lack of connectivity understood as a form of unfortunate disenfranchisement.⁶ When urban-based experts spend set amounts of time in regional locations, sharing skills in pilot projects which community members must ultimately maintain, not only are the pre-existing skills of locals overlooked, their relevance for capitalising on or finessing the good intentions of city-based researchers are left unexplored.⁷ Predefined skills training takes precedent over more complex attempts to assess how the 'information economy' can be made relevant in those parts of the country which play a significant role in the country's overall economic fortune.

Contemplating the relevance of broadband to rural communities involves knowing the different priorities that exist in these areas, which affect the kind of applications and services that will be valued. These requirements will at least deviate from the office-based schedules pushing many improvements in ICT design, as well as the entertainment preferences of young users driving demand for faster broadband.⁸ To make rural connectivity relevant to those who aren't already aware of broadband's benefits means understanding the habits and routines of those who *don't* work in jobs in suburbs or city centres, who might not aspire to visit these centres in any case, and whose everyday life may be blissfully free of computer dependence. At the same time more has to be done to reflect the different forms of cultural expertise and authority that operate as influencers in rural areas. The civic institutions that have flourished across Australia's diverse regions over the past century—from Rotary to the RSL, churches to Parents and Citizens Groups—question fundamental assumptions about the benefits of the

⁶ In an article specifically focusing on their feminist program to assist rural women, Lennie, Hatcher and Morgan (2003) discuss the problems involved when researchers assume such women will be 'empowered' as a result of technology training programs run by 'relatively privileged urban feminist academics, with different needs, agendas, and ideologies, and different levels of knowledge and expertise' (58). They also highlight the hierarchies of knowledge and status between women in the workshops and how this affected efforts to both maintain and disavow academic authority.

⁷ As cultural studies and anthropology researchers, when participants describe themselves as 'ordinary people' and 'ordinary women' (in Lennie et al. 2003: 74) we would regard this less as evidence of a 'discourse of powerlessness' but rather as an opportunity to reflect upon and represent the distinct forms of situated, vernacular knowledge a different cultural context generates. Cultural theory would recognise that education is only one form of 'capital' among others (Bourdieu 1986). It would also encourage caution in thinking that IT skills and competence (and their alleged benefits) would be transmitted easily through a short period of training, for this overlooks attendant qualities of entitlement, confidence, diligence and self-improvement (just some of the motivating influences involved in the desire for maintaining IT skills) which are learned and embodied over a lifetime (what Bourdieu calls 'habitus').

⁸ This is not to argue that rural Australia doesn't need the sophisticated technology services that underpin the online experience of city dwellers. The diversity of rural constituencies is precisely our point. In fact if the 98% of households were taken as dictum this could easily mean that Tasmania's capital city would lose all claim to high-speed broadband services—and this outcome is still possible given the current terminology, as submissions to the DBCDE website demonstrate.

digital economy, particularly the notion that online connection is the best form of networking. It is these organizations that have provided the solace and support for rural citizens that online services often replace in urban contexts, so it is only fitting that they play a part in finessing and legitimising online connectivity for local requirements. In fact research is needed to assess how much of this work is already taking place before further measures are suggested.

Our interest in the potential role for the Country Women’s Association (CWA) in developing demand for rural broadband stems from our wider appreciation of women’s contribution as intermediaries for technology adoption in domestic contexts. The generationally-specific networking capacities of the CWA place it as a forerunner to the many web-based networking initiatives of the present, and make it an ideal partner to be addressed and harnessed as ‘ordinary women’ in rural areas are encouraged to embrace the vision of technological empowerment imagined in ALP policy. As a recognised body for the past 80 years, the CWA has been a major stakeholder in developments in telecommunications throughout this period. Attention to this history not only sheds light on the ways media and communications technologies have been adopted in Australia’s past, it allows the opportunity for research and policy outcomes to be reframed and improved from such knowledge in face of present challenges.

The CWA as social network

The Country Women’s Association was founded in New South Wales in 1922 with an explicit charter to address the concerns of rural Australia, and in particular rural women (Sawyer 1937; Townsend 1988). The title of this paper is drawn from the CWA’s motto:

Honour to God, Loyalty to the Throne, Service to the Country,

Through country women, By country women, For country women.

The first two lines of the motto suggest the difficult position the CWA occupies in today’s secular public culture. The narrative of membership decline charted by Teather (1992: 166) graphically indicates that a generational rejuvenation of the Association has yet to take hold. But as she also argues, the strength of feeling among members towards the motto is also attributable to characteristics of the ‘rural ethos’, which include ‘proud independence; family centredness; strict adherence to gender roles by men but far less by women... and a strong commitment to, and enjoyment of, life on the farm or in small communities’ (167). In this vein, the CWA has contributed substantial financial and emotional support to rural communities nationwide through changing economic and cultural conditions (CWA 1972; Townsend 1988; Doran 1992; Stevens-Chambers 1997; Read 2006).

In today’s terms, the CWA is an archetypal ‘social network’. The fundraising efforts and competitive ethos typifying its ‘Golden Years’ (the 1940s to 1960s) are worth serious examination at a time when major multinational companies are desperate to find the magic formula to monetise the influence of key online portals such as Facebook and MySpace. Through various small-scale but viral money-making schemes, including regular cake stalls, flea markets and fetes in rural towns throughout the country, the Association has provided an alternative source of income beyond government and business patronage. This substantial fundraising capacity, based on a combination of Teather’s ‘rural ethos’ and a commitment to civic duty, offers a fascinating counterpoint to neoliberal Third way/Public-Private-Partnership funding structures, which seem to face ongoing ideological and logistical obstacles in delivering quality communications infrastructure. This latter is clearly evident in the protracted bidding process for the Federal Government’s broadband roll-out.

The CWA is an acknowledged strong social, moral and cultural force in the lives of rural Australians, and has also gained unexpected support and engagement from metropolitan regions. Its traditions have grown and adapted to the changing needs of its constituents, including recent initiatives in drought relief, land care, breast cancer awareness, mobile phone recycling and protection against cyberfraud (www.cwaa.org.au). The CWA has always been involved in – sometimes leading – critical issues for rural Australia: in treatment for venereal disease, the construction of hospitals, schools, hostels and ‘rest rooms’, fundraising and lobbying for services (eg. electricity, wireless transmitters), even the service of mid-strength alcohol and the development of line marking on country roads (CWA 1986; Saunders 1997; Sturma 1988; Jones 2006). The Aims of the Association reflect the CWA’s role to connect dispersed and isolated rural women, not only to enjoy the friendship and companionship of each other but to do good for the community through the provision of information and necessary services.⁹

The CWA has been a key driver in rural and regional life, providing solidarity between women through meetings and shared pursuits. In contrast to the ‘disempowered’ rural women observed in the studies cited above, the CWA has always made a feature of the skills of its members, with meetings often organized around the sharing of a particular form of expertise (lamp shade decorating, drawing, needlework; see also Lee 1985). This *mundane pedagogy* is an early example of the ‘gift economy’ lately celebrated in online contexts (Benkler 2006). Indeed during the major expansion period of the Association, more established Branches would literally send gift packages to newcomers to assist their efforts to establish the Association in ever greater numbers. The proud competitiveness encouraged by involvement in contests in rural shows has also been a way for women in distributed locations to refine each other’s skills and expertise, as well as reward and celebrate excellence in highly meaningful local social gatherings.

In noting these features we are emphasizing the role that rural women – and the organizations to which they have historically belonged, including the church, school boards, and other outlets for voluntary labour – have played in establishing, maintaining and enhancing ‘good’ civic and domestic practices. In particular, the CWA has been at the forefront of efforts to identify government initiatives that would be of relevance to the constituency it serves. In recent times this role has been made explicit in Federal Government schemes drawing on the CWA as a partner (in assessing the effects of drought) or as stakeholder (on consumer boards discussing telecommunications provision). The NSW CWA Submission to the Inquiry into the Provisions of the Telecommunications Legislation Amendment (Protecting Services for Rural and Regional Australia into the Future) Bill 2007 typifies the resolve of the Association when it comes to demanding adequate phone infrastructure. It also hints at the challenge the Government now faces convincing rural residents that their broadband plan will work:

⁹ 1. By community service to improve conditions in the country more especially as they affect the welfare of women and children; 2. To arrest the drift from rural areas; 3. To establish where possible Branches of the Association; 4. To organize and support schemes for the benefit on members and for community welfare; 5. To promote friendship amongst members of the Association and sister organizations and to welcome and take a kindly interest in all newcomers to every district; 6. To encourage members and their families to develop personal skills; 7. To interest members in the proper development of their district, local town and State, so that industrial development progresses with good living conditions; 8. To encourage and work for international understanding through the Associated Country Women of the World; 9. To encourage members to take an intelligent interest in the workings of Government at Local, State and Federal levels; and 10. To co-operate or affiliate with any other Associations with similar objects; and to become a member with other State Associations of the Country Women’s Association of Australia and to be represented as such member by representatives or delegates

Many of our CWA members have the same view – give us a reliable landline service. That is the minimum we require, and we could live without mobile coverage if we had a reliable landline service. We find it is taking longer and longer to have faults fixed, as a result of linesmen and technicians in country areas being retrenched. Often the repairers are from other areas and have no knowledge of the terrain or location of properties. Even to have a new line connected can take weeks and yet every time we speak to someone in a Telstra call centre, they try to sell us another service. Just fix the ones we have, please. (CWA 2007: 4)

The CWA has been concerned about phones, radio and electricity from the very beginning. One of its precursors, the Women’s Section of the Victorian Farmers Union, had also attempted to point out the ways in which users in rural sectors were not getting the same amount of resources as the city. ‘They had voiced, to no avail, their demands for better mail services for country areas, a phone service and some system for giving rural women instruction in basic nursing, cooking and dress making’ (Townsend 1988: 4). This was in the first decade of 1900s. By 1922, Grace Munro, the First President of the CWA, was already lobbying the Postmaster-General ‘to provide a better postal service and a wider telephone network in country areas’ (Townsend 1988: 13). These lobbying efforts continued throughout the last century. A collection of Resolutions carried at State Conferences between 1961–1984 and published by the CWA under the title *Getting Things Done* (1986) gives an overview of the kinds of issues the CWA pursued. A selection of motions related to telecommunications includes:

NSW1964: ‘That in view of the new rental rates, all telephone truck calls over a radius of 30 miles be extended to five minutes, to replace the present three minute period, at no extra cost to the caller.’

WA 1975: ‘That the CWA approach the Federal Government to have the high cost of telephone installations and calls reduced in isolated areas.’

QLD 1977: ‘That Telecom Australia be urged to change their policy re the installation of automatic telephones to country subscribers, priority be given to providing a telephone service to all country people before upgrading existing services.’

QLD 1977: ‘That the Federal Government be requested to rectify the injustice of high telephone rental charges in country areas and investigate alternate methods of charging; that they be asked to reduce the excessive trunk line charge from small country town and rural areas and that the times for reduced charges of trunk line calls revert to 6pm to 9am.’

WA 1978: ‘That more pressure be applied to Telecom to provide telephones in families in remote country areas at present not served by telephone.’ (1986: 10–11)

The echoes are striking between this last point and the 2007 inquiry submission cited above. Taking the CWA as a prism for the advocacy and consultation work around rural communications infrastructure reveals that the same issues have been a feature of debate for over 20 years. As such, the organization provides a fascinating opportunity to contemplate some long-term trends, not only in media and technology adoption but in how women’s economic contribution to society has been estimated (Cameron & Gibson-Graham 2003). In this sense, the prospect of the National Broadband Network provides a timely event to draw on and extend this history for mutual benefit. Our final section outlines a large scale project we have under development which aims to pursue these points in greater depth.

A new approach

Country women’s work in and outside the home has provided a major contribution to the identity and fortunes of rural Australia (O’Toole & Macgarvey 2003; Alston 1990; Kerry

1989; Clark 1989). The CWA is proof that country people are neither illiterate¹⁰ nor isolated; in fact they have some of the most sophisticated networking and support infrastructure anywhere in the world. Prior studies in Australia and elsewhere have highlighted the central role that women have had in settling new technologies into the home and hence the broader community (Moyal 1990, 1984; Johnson, 1988; Spigel 1992; Silverstone & Hersch 1992; Lally 2002). More recently, studies are beginning to investigate the ways in which women's social networking practices—facilitated by broadband—extend this to the very latest era (Thomas, Ewing and Schiessl 2008). Adding to this growing field, we propose to address the challenge of rural relevancy with a multi-sited ethnographic study of women's technology use across several states. Working in partnership with the Country Women's Association, we will conduct interviews and fieldwork in a set of key sites that capture the diverse regional conditions affecting users across rural Australia. The benefit of this approach is that it takes account of how geographical features, climate, population density and other issues contribute to the likelihood of technology adoption. It reiterates the significance of place and the particularity of local landscapes at a time when powerful interests are served by celebrating mobility and placelessness. It is too convenient for big business and government to claim the need for new technologies when this silences the voices of real users who are already abstractions on an unknown map.¹¹ Our aim is to record the human stories that the current focus on statistics and the economics of infrastructure roll-out does not offer: to generate a grounded account of everyday practice in country Australia.

Drawing on feminist and cultural studies accounts of everyday life and media consumption, we want to offer a larger story that describes how 'home economics'—the domestically and civically oriented activity of organizations like the CWA—has national implications. This is to see country women as already active intermediaries of technology as part of 'ordinary' domestic pursuits, and to note how these practices have already contributed to women's education and advancement locally and over a number of generations.¹² Our research will collect oral histories that explain women's status as major drivers in rural and regional life, to record the role women have played in pioneering technology use as part of household management and family maintenance. It will engage in extensive participant observation in civic institutions such as charities, churches and associations such as the CWA so that the priorities of rural and regional life can be better reflected. This will provide the lacking context for technology adoption that assumes a metropolitan user experience and a logic of individual consumer entitlement.

This more nuanced approach uses ethnographic methods to appreciate and learn from the dynamics of rural and regional life. It considers what it would mean to *slow down* the research

¹⁰ As this resolution from the 1980 NSW State convention suggests: 'that CWA of NSW strongly urge that a special reduced rate of postage be introduced for books and printed matter, especially that of an educational nature.'

¹¹ Another passage from the 2007 Senate Inquiry submission reads: 'The only reason [our committee member] needed a mobile phone service was to ring Telstra to report her landline out of order...'. It concludes by saying: 'As I prepare this submission on a Sunday, my landline is out of order. Staff have driven 40 kilometres to report their phone and mine out of order. Telstra will not take a report from anyone other than the subscriber that the phone is out of order, so for me to report my phone out, I too need to drive 40 kilometres. Other people in the area have been told that crews will not even be available until Tuesday' (4–5).

¹² This larger project would necessarily involve understanding such factors as state-sanctioned domestic science and home economics programs in formal education, and how this shaped desirable versions of femininity and citizenship. Further, we would take as another aim an account of the informal teaching and learning opportunities (described above as 'mundane pedagogy') the CWA has provided, and how these have translated into successive generations of high school and tertiary ('formal') educators as well as key policy and professional positions in tandem with Second Wave feminism.

and activist agenda around rural technology use as well as the pace and urgency of efforts to get connected online. It involves staying in a location long enough to listen face-to-face to the concerns of residents expressed in their own terms. Drawing on our combined experience of living and working in rural areas and being involved with the CWA, we aim to demonstrate the possible functions for civic institutions in disseminating the knowledge, expertise and desire for new communications technologies. Given their centrality in rural life, it is these community hubs that will need to be mobilised to embrace the new economy as much as individual consumers—and like each economic formation before it, it is women who will be at the forefront of such efforts, particularly within the home.

Conclusions and implications

The proposed project is not limited to the involvement of CWA members but is formulated to recognise the importance of organised networks in country life and the vast, largely untapped histories these associations contain. It acknowledges that civic bodies provide gate-keeping functions and access points to developing relationships with communities beyond parachute models. In light of these benefits however the project should not be seen as reclaiming the history of the CWA for opportunistic or progressive ends, precisely because we are well aware of its rich heritage.¹³ Rather we are interested in the circumstances of the present which see the decline in membership of the CWA alongside its ongoing prominence as a national stakeholder. If the demographic for CWA membership is aging (Teather 1992a, 1992b) this is all the more reason to appreciate the Association's unique networking model as a precursor to contemporary developments in online culture. Looking back at the lobbying and fundraising work of years past—around wireless radio transmitters in outback areas, for example, which bears further examination given the number of proposals for servicing the missing 2% of the NBN which use wireless technology (www.dbcde.gov.au)—is to realise the possibilities to be seized in the current context of broadband roll-out. This initiative can re-energize at the same time as it utilizes the social, cultural and financial capital of our diverse and accomplished national civic networks.

In order to meaningfully deliver on their promise of domestic connectivity for all Australians, the Government needs new ideas to develop a thorough understanding of the concerns of ordinary rural users. Rural connectivity is not just a matter of infrastructure roll-outs or top-down initiatives but is also a matter of establishing relevance. To do this requires an appreciation of the past and present priorities of rural communities and their achievements. The brief account of CWA advocacy we have offered in this paper indicates how much the language of the 'digital divide' misrepresents a history of critical consumption and concerted activism around new communications technology.

Our work intends to provide an overdue reflection of the distinctiveness of Australia's civic institutions and the strength of our regions. Ultimately, the benefits of the research will be threefold: by providing better accounts of the context behind technological adoption, it will allow more effective public policy to be written, and in doing so give rural Australians the confidence that their skills and opinions are valuable in helping shape the nation's future. Above all, we think an ethnographic approach will hasten an *ethics of listening* in both

¹³ The Association's important work around race relationships and desegregation, recognised by Jones (2005), would have been radical initiatives of their time, whereas there were clear signs of a lingering White Australia ideology in the Association's attitude towards Prime Minister Paul Keating's push for a closer relationship with Asia.

research and policy initiatives so that the legitimate needs of rural communities can perhaps finally be met.

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