

# **Libraries, ICT policy, and Australian civil society: issues and prospects from national consultations**

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## ***Abstract***

*The vision of Australia as a knowledge society underpinned by e-democracy was strongly articulated in national consultations towards an information economy strategy for Australian civil society in 2003 - 2005. The consultations had two purposes:*

- To assist with Australia's contributions to the two UN/ITU World Summits on the Information Society (Geneva in 2003, Tunis in 2005),*
- To complement Australia's Framework for the Information Economy 2004-2006, a major policy statement by the Australian government.*

*This paper gives an account of the research approach used for the consultations, reports on major findings from the consultative process, and offers comment on these from a library perspective. In the interests of spreading useful and reliable knowledge as widely as possible, improving engagement with their communities, and bettering their reputation worldwide, libraries should work harder to play a key role in the concerns enumerated by civil society.*

## Introduction

This paper reports major findings from a recent national consultation towards an information economy strategy for Australian civil society, and offers comment on these from a library perspective. The consultation – along with its 2003 predecessor -- had two purposes:

- To assist with Australia's contribution to the second part of the UN/ITU World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS2 – Tunis 2005).
- To complement *Australia's Framework for the Information Economy 2004-2006* (Australia, 2004), a major policy statement by the Australian government.

The topic will be dealt with in three parts:

1. Account of the two rounds of RACS (Roundtable on Australian Civil Society) consultations in 2003 and 2005, and their design as participative research projects.
2. Report of major findings from the 2005 consultation, with selective presentation of library perspectives on these findings.
3. Recommendations proposed as a result of the 2005 consultation, with comments on their implications for libraries.

The paper seeks to indicate how library stakeholders at the local, state, national and international levels can contribute to the strengthening of civil society through sustained policy and service development, underpinned by research, and undertaken in collaboration with other civil society stakeholders, business and government. Australians are well endowed by world standards, and the library profession has a moral obligation to support less fortunate groups. The figures are stark. There are 2.5 billion registered library users in the world,<sup>1</sup> Australians themselves making 105 million visits to local government, national and state libraries per annum.<sup>2</sup> More than six million Australians or 42% of the population visit libraries at least once a year.<sup>3</sup> All Australians can use 4,638 Internet workstations in public libraries, or more than one in two Australians can use the Internet in their own home,<sup>4</sup> compared with only one African in 250 who has any access anywhere to the Internet.<sup>5</sup> Globally 86% of the population is without access to the Internet,<sup>6</sup> while more than 75% of Australians have access.<sup>7</sup>

## The 2003 and 2005 Consultations, and their Design as Participative Research Projects

The three stakeholders identified by the UN as parties to the WSIS process are:

- a) government,
- b) business (referred to as the private sector), and
- c) civil society.

International and regional organisations which may encompass one or more of these categories are accorded a distinctive status as parties to WSIS.

## **The 2003 Consultation**

The identification of ‘civil society’ as a WSIS stakeholder category posed a challenge to Australia. When preparation commenced for WSIS1 in 2003, there was no existing entity that could be recognised as a representative body for all the civil society categories or ‘families’ identified in the WSIS documentation. The various Civil Society families recognised by WSIS include: the Media; NGOs; Youth; Gender; Volunteers; Cities and Local Authorities; Trade Unions; Indigenous People; Education Academia and Research; Science and Technology Community; Creators and Promoters of Culture; Networks and Coalitions; Multi-stakeholder Partnerships; Philanthropic Institutions; Think Tanks; People with Disabilities.<sup>8</sup>

On the initiative of the former National Office of the Information Economy (NOIE) two groups – Monash University (Centre for Community Networking Research – CCNR) and the University of Central Queensland (COIN Academy)<sup>9</sup> – were requested to convene and facilitate a consultative process during 2003. As a result an ad hoc organisation was formed, namely RACS, the Roundtable on Australian Civil Society, as a means of eliciting a Statement from Australian Civil Society for WSIS1 (Roundtable on Australian Civil Society, 2003).

Priority issues elicited from the consultations for the first RACS Statement were:

- Indigenous Australians
- Digital Inclusion and spatial isolation
- Democratic plurality through ICT
- Inclusion and interoperability
- Access to content and technology
- Effective use, not just technology
- Volunteers in the civil society
- Rights to privacy
- Knowledge sharing and intellectual property
- Need for a continuing dialogue.

The RACS Statement accompanied the Australian Country Statement as Australia’s formal contribution to the first phase of WSIS and civil society representatives (Prof. Wal Taylor, then of Central Queensland University, and Ms Sue Connolly, Cape York Digital Network) formed part of the Australian delegation to the first Summit meeting in Geneva in December 2003.

## **The 2005 Consultation**

For WSIS2 a similar approach was taken. The extra consultations were funded as a research project by the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA), with matching funds from the Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University. It was again auspiced by the Roundtable on Australian Civil Society (RACS), and conducted by Monash University’s Centre for Community Networking Research (CCNR)<sup>10</sup> this time in conjunction with the Foundation for Development Co-operation (FDC)<sup>11</sup>, a Brisbane-based NGO. Once again, to find organised elements of civil society the investigation looked to trade unions, religious groups, foundations, community organisations, social movements, non-government organisations and non-profits, volunteer organisations,

charities, co-operatives, professional associations, educational institutions, clubs, public media, and others.

The resulting document was the *Draft Information Economy Strategy for Australian Civil Society* (2005) which was intended to advance the agenda of the *Framework for the Information Economy 2004-2006* (Australia, 2004) as well as provide an appropriately action-oriented statement for WSIS2. Two of the researchers involved in the development of the *Draft Strategy*, Prof. Don Schauder and Dr Graeme Johanson, were part of the Australian delegation to WSIS2 in Tunis in November 2005, to assist in bringing insights from the consultation to bear on a range of discussions at the Summit.

Major themes that emerged from the 2005 consultation were a good deal wider in their coverage than the themes of the 2003 consultation:

- Perspectives on the nature of civil society
- Civil society, social capital and the learning society
- Ongoing networks and keeping up with technology
- Digital inclusion and consumer choice
- Participation in the political process: 'e-democracy'
- Governance and co-ordination
- Sustainability of programs and projects
- Research needs.

## **Policy focus**

The second round of consultations took as a major focus the following government objectives extracted from *Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004-2006: Opportunities and Challenges for the Information Age* (the indented text, with its numbering is extracted verbatim from the Framework):

1. Ensure that all Australians have the capabilities, networks and tools to participate in the benefits of the information economy.

S1.1 Develop the networks and capabilities needed by people living in regional communities, Indigenous Australians, older Australians, people with disabilities and others facing economic or social barriers to participation, to participate in the information economy.

S1.2 Strengthen collaboration and capabilities in SMEs, not-for-profit organisations, and key industry sectors to facilitate their participation in the information economy.

S1.3 Promote investment in broadband infrastructure, content, capabilities and networks in regional areas and in key industry sectors.

2. Ensure the security and interoperability of Australia's information infrastructure, and support confidence in digital services.

S2.2 Improve the culture of security in both public and private organisations.

S2.6 Ensure the interoperability of Australia's information infrastructure through effective partnership between public and private sectors.

3. Develop Australia's innovation system as a platform for productivity growth and industry transformation.

S3.1 Build an innovation culture through improved access to education and skills development.

S3.3 Achieve global scale and critical mass in priority research areas.

S3.4 Develop ICT research networks as a platform for enhanced national and global research collaboration.

4. Raise Australian public sector productivity, collaboration and accessibility through the effective use of information, knowledge and ICT.

S4.1 Develop governance and business arrangements that ensure accountability, efficiency, transparency and integration.

S4.2 Develop an Australian Government ICT investment and interoperability framework to support integrated services.

S4.3 Develop collaborative approaches across government that promote the creation, sharing, protection and accessibility of information and knowledge.

### **Consultative procedure**

In order to develop a civil society strategy that added a civil society dimension to the Australian government's *Strategic Framework*, the Centre for Community Networking Research undertook consultation sessions in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, with participation from interest groups across the spectrum of Australian civil society. Information from these sessions was selectively supplemented by relevant documentary resources.

A final national consultation to review a preliminary *Draft Strategy* document was held in Sydney on 2 March 2005. The *Draft Strategy* document was also circulated for comment by email to civil society representatives who were unable to attend the meetings.

In each place of consultation a range of stakeholders, from interested individuals to peak national civil society bodies, were approached by e-mail about willingness to attend discussions about the effective use of ICT by citizens and consumers across civil society. A total of about 60 representatives from civil society organisations volunteered to attend the series of focus groups in the different cities, moderated by Beris Gwynne, Executive Director, the Foundation for Development Co-operation (FDC), and her colleague Stuart Mathison, Program Manager, Information Society & Development (FDC). Before the groups met they were asked to consider these nine important questions:

1 Do members of civil society in Australia have the necessary capabilities, networks, and tools to enable them to participate in the information economy?

- 2 Do members of civil society in Australia have the necessary ICT capabilities, networks, and tools to help advance their economic, social, education and cultural goals and activities?
- 3 What barriers currently prevent effective involvement by civil society in the information economy and their effective use of ICT to advance its goals and activities? Barriers may be internal or external.
- 4 Specifically in relation to use of the Internet, are there governance issues that impact on members of civil society and their ability to participate in the information society?
- 5 Is civil society using ICT as part of effective collaborations and partnerships with business and government?
- 6 With regard to the key themes previously identified by RACS, which represent significant concerns for your sector?
- 7 What is the relevance to, and possible implications for, civil society of the Australian Government's information economy priorities and strategies?
- 8 What are the key priorities and strategies needed to facilitate future ICT adoption and effective use by civil society organisations?
- 9 Are there other concerns or issues that need to be raised in terms of the ability of civil society to make effective use of ICT and/or participate in the information economy?

Discussion was not confined to these questions. Participants were free to introduce related or new issues that they regarded as relevant to the intention of the broad process.

## **Research approach for the 2003 and 2005 consultations**

This research used Participative Action Research (PAR) and Grounded Theory (GT) as methodologies, balanced against adaptations of Structuration, as developed by Giddens (1984) and Orlikowski and Robey (1991).

Participative Action Research (PAR) involves the researcher and the community at the source of the investigation as partners using a collaborative approach to inquiry. It provides people with the means to take systematic action and resolve specific problems (Stringer, 1996). It normally begins by building a basis for participation by developing relationships between stakeholders and negotiating roles and responsibilities (Dick, 1999). PAR is one of the family of Action Research (AR) methodologies in a four-class taxonomy of AR, including AR, PAR, action science, and action learning, that has been used to classify significant Information Systems (IS) research (Lau, 1997).

The domain for the PAR method has been described as a social setting where:

- the researcher is actively involved, with expected benefit for both the researcher and the organisation,
- the knowledge obtained can be immediately applied, there is not the sense of the detached observer, but that of an active participant wishing to utilise any new knowledge based on an explicit, clear conceptual framework,
- the research is a (typically cyclical) process linking theory and practice (Baskerville, 1999).

PAR has been found to be a valuable tool in encouraging civic involvement in a government setting provided that a local authority can provide the flexibility to operate within the cyclical processes, that it involves an experienced researcher and there is a commitment to eliminate

power imbalances (Aimers, 1999). PAR has been promoted as being able to enrich the IS research community by drawing researcher-practitioners into the research process (McKay and Marshall, 2001; Baskerville, 2001) and benefit the local community by contributing to the knowledge base of the local community (Dick, 1999).

In the RACS process, the researchers' elicitation of civil society viewpoints and aspirations has taken advantage of grounded theory methodology (GT) as well, in the sense that social action in natural settings has been stimulated and observed in detail. Extensive consultations with civil society members and groups across the country over more than two years enabled comprehensive capture and analysis of the implications of the daily practical experiences of participants (Charmaz, 2000; Stoeker, 2005).

PAR and GT as a research approach is central to the new discipline of Community Informatics (CI) as espoused by Gurstein (2000), Schuler, Day 2001, Harris (2001) and others, as well as being the foundation for national and international collectives such as the Association for Community Networking (AFCN, USA), Foundation for Community Networking (FCN), the European Association for Community Networking (EACN) and the Community Informatics Research Network (CIRN). The central concept of the power of social shaping of ICT provides a rationale for the CI approach, which in turn is recursive (a Giddens term) and strengthens both the applications and the communities themselves.

Underlying the PAR/GT is the concept of Structuration as created by Giddens (1984), and developed by Orlikowski and Robey (1991) and others. It has been the key influence on Information Continuum theory as developed at Monash University (Schauder, Johanson and Stillman, 2005). Structuration holds that:

The best and most interesting ideas in the social sciences (a) participate in fostering the climate of opinion and the social processes, which give rise to them, (b) are in greater or lesser degree entwined with theories-in-use which help to constitute those processes and (c) are thus unlikely to be clearly distinct from considered reflection which lay actors may bring to bear in so far as they discursively articulate, or improve upon, theories-in-use (Giddens, 1984: 34).

In laying the basis for Structuration, Giddens points out that originality of theories in natural science is dependent upon the degree to which they question what people previously believed about them. But theories in the social sciences are already held by the agents to whom they refer and once they are re-incorporated within action, their original quality is lost; they become all too familiar (Giddens, 1984: 34).

Structuration theory has the potential to address the dialectical nature of diffusion/adoption of ICT within a system that can include a community. Data collection in this research investigation identified the interaction between structures and people in shaping each other as an important construct in examining adoption of ICT for community development in a regional setting. At the same time Structuration appears able to accommodate a case study approach and meet some of the inadequacies identified in other adoption/diffusion approaches and theories.

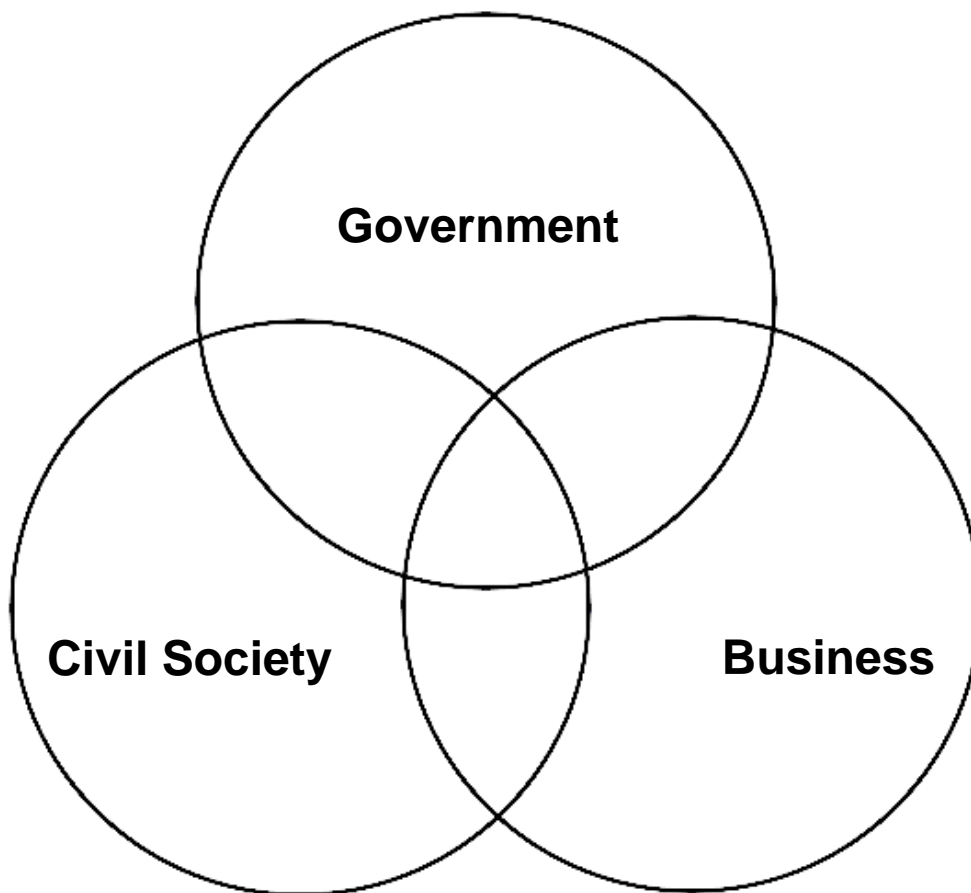
# Issues on ICT and civil society, with selective library perspectives

Views expressed by participants in the consultations of 2003 and 2005, with email follow-up, and selectively supplemented by a range of other knowledge sources, provided the following perspectives and insights.

## The nature of civil society

Opinions on what constitutes civil society strongly supported the understandings expressed in the Statement for WSIS1, namely ‘a discrete non-government, non-business sector with a particular set of interests and a public voice’.

However while civil society was recognised as a discrete sector, perhaps equally important were the overlaps seen with the other two sectors of society, namely government and business, as represented in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1: Civil Society, Government and Business: discrete but interdependent sectors**

This conceptualisation by the RACS consultation of civil society and its relationship would appear to present no difficulties for libraries. Libraries and their users are well accustomed to the fact that libraries operate as agencies within all three sectors, civil society, government

and business, but continuously strive to identify common interests and collaborate in the wider interests of society.

## **Civil society, social capital and public critique**

The Consultation identified the following understandings on the nature of civil society as being of importance for the framing of ICT policy.

The concept of civil society as a discrete non-government, non-business interest is one that has only emerged in recent times in Australia. Civil society as a ‘third sector’ is easily identifiable with the interests of non-government organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations, or not-for-profit organisations (Lyons, 2001). It is acknowledged that civil society is not yet a ‘mainstream’ concept in Australia, but an awareness of this ‘lens’ for understanding society as a whole is becoming more widespread. With the advent of the Internet, civil society has been used in a global sense for the first time, to allude to extensive sharing of knowledge and expertise within and beyond national boundaries on a voluntary basis.

Essentially, civil society means community groupings or networks, and their activities. Civil society is an expression of shared democratic values and resources which is distinct from, but which intersects with, those of democratic political institutions or businesses. Civil society acts for the public good, in the space between the state and market sectors. Civil society does not have much power in totalitarian regimes.

Together the three sectors help to create social capital – the combined value of all the resources available within social groups, such as communities, families, firms, social clubs, as well as the networks of mutual support, reciprocity, trust and obligation associated with them. It is important to recognise that civil society readily transcends geographical boundaries, especially when issues common to humanity as a whole are involved. An ICT strategy for Australian civil society should take full account of the international dimension of civil society.

Social capital is accumulated when people interact with others in family life, workplaces, neighbourhoods, local associations, and a range of informal and formal meeting-places. The OECD definition of social capital is ‘networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate co-operation within or among groups.’<sup>12</sup> Social capital can be created, but it can also be destroyed or dissipated. The key ingredient in building and using social capital is trust in relationships resulting from long-term positive experiences and dealings. Civil society has a key role to play in the building of trust.

The public good is as important to civil society as markets or governance. Concern for the public good is not confined to civil society: it is a central concern for governments, and businesses too have a social obligation (‘corporate citizenship’), in addition to making profits. However civil society groups often have a close-up understanding of community issues in a way not available to government (except perhaps local government) or larger business organisations.

In democracies, the nation as a whole must accept that civil society will engage in constructive criticism of business, government, and civil society itself because this is part of civil society’s core role as loyal critic. ‘Making a noise’ on some issues is a necessary

function. Civil society sometimes will speak with divergent voices – it can be diverse, disorganised and informal. The societal condition which must be continuously pursued and defended by civil society guarantees opportunities for all citizens to ‘speak’ and to be heard. In principle, libraries are committed to:

promotion of the free flow of information and ideas through open access to recorded knowledge, information, and creative works.

The Australian Library and Information Association asserts:

that this access across time and across cultures is fundamental to a thriving culture, economy and democracy.<sup>13</sup>

Dr Alex Byrne, President of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) for 2005-2007 was an active participant in the RACS Consultations, as was Jennefer Nicholson, Executive Director of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA). Under Alex Byrne’s leadership IFLA has been a vigorous contributor to the WSIS process and is increasingly emphasising the role of libraries in the shaping of society. IFLA has recently adopted a new model of Three Pillars, the first of which is ‘society’:

The Society Pillar focuses on the role and impact of libraries and information services in society and the contextual issues that condition and constrain the environment in which they operate across the world.<sup>14</sup>

## **The knowledge society and e-democracy**

Continuously developing Australia as a knowledge society was seen as crucial by participants in the consultation. Indeed it was regarded as the cornerstone of ICT policy for civil society. There was effectively complete consensus on this among participants, although there was a range of nuances in participants’ articulation of the scope and priorities of a knowledge society. The message was that citizens who have power to learn, to collaborate, and make informed decisions whether small or great are vital to civil society in a democracy. Important aspects are the creation, elicitation and sharing of public knowledge, and the building of societal memory.

ICT-enabled civil society can help greatly in the evolution of e-democracy. E-democracy is seen as an emergent phenomenon that is closely associated with the capacity of people to make effective use of ICT for knowledge sharing and communication.

It is recognised that ICT could make possible a democratic structure that is flatter and more ‘participative’ than traditional vertical ‘representative’ structures. For example, by using ICT, hourly referenda could occur rather than voting by representatives in parliament. However radical transformation to this extent is not seen to be likely or desirable. Instead e-democracy will probably evolve as the on-going enhancement of existing representative democratic processes, in which ICT supports more effective knowledge creation and sharing among citizens who make up civil society, and more effective communication between citizens, public servants and elected parliamentary representatives. It is seen as a particular role of civil society organisations to monitor the transformative impacts of ICT on the nature of parliamentary representation, the operations of government, and the delivery of government

services, to ensure that opportunities, choices and democratic freedoms for all citizens are at least maintained or preferably enhanced.

Participants saw as a barrier to the knowledge society and e-democracy the abuse of the open Internet. Whereas the rules and conventions of traditional democratic communication processes (such as parliamentary hearings or letters to newspapers) are well understood, there have been varied experiences when elected representatives have experimented with virtual forums for communicating with the public at large. Discovering appropriate and constructive ways in which ICT can enhance political processes, rather than exacerbate difficulties and frictions, is a major task in the intersecting area of civil society and government (see Fig. 1).

International charters, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, were often referred to in this discussion. Notable among these was Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which affirms the right to free speech: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers'. Article 27 of the same Declaration states: 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits'. Article III.20 of the United Nations Millennium Declaration pledges 'that the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies ... are available to all'. Other charters commended for use in policy formulation were the 'Charter for Knowledge Societies' of the International Association of Media and Communications Researchers (IAMCR). It advocates principles such as the following:

- There should be free access to information, regardless of borders and medium;
- Intellectual freedom is sacrosanct with due respect for intellectual property and with the capacity to contribute to cultural diversity in all media;
- Knowledge creation and acquisition should be nurtured as a participatory and collective process, and not be considered a one-way flow or confined to one section of capacity-building;
- Culturally appropriate learning and research practices, with in-built maintenance programs and upgrading capacities, should be developed for community-based self-supporting systems; and
- Open access to knowledge should be encouraged, along the lines of initiatives such as Budapest Open Access Initiative,<sup>15</sup> Berlin Declaration,<sup>16</sup> Creative Commons,<sup>17</sup> and Open Courseware Initiative.<sup>18</sup>

From a library perspective, the UK Office of the e-Envoy published 'In the service of democracy: a consultation paper on a policy for electronic democracy', which attracted a comprehensive and affirmative response from Resource in 2002.<sup>19</sup> 'Resource' is the short name for the UK Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries.

Among the initiatives listed by the Resource were (verbatim quote):

- Creating ICT Learning Centres in 4,300 public libraries throughout the UK.
- Enabling e-Citizenship by providing European Computer Driving Licence (EDCL) training to public library staff, empowering them to help users get online.
- Facilitating the creation of online resources through the New Opportunities Fund

Digitisation Programme, producing digital learning journeys that will delight, fascinate and encourage further exploration of the Web.

Resource goes on to say:

The People's Network project is UK-wide, and provides through ICT Learning Centres an hour of free Internet time for every man, woman and child in the UK.

These strands are further supported by a range of activity including the development and promotion of standards for digital service delivery. Resource works to ensure that all cultural institutions, whether museums, archives or libraries are able to convey the full benefits of ICT to their users.

In Australia, repeatedly, participants in the consultation cited as a good-practice example 'Knowledge Centres' developed by the Northern Territory Library and Information Services<sup>20</sup>. The NTLIS have developed implementation plans with community councils and their respective libraries, to install and progress databases of local cultural and historical information. A training model involving basic computer skills, operation of the database and methods of creating digital media is being developed. This model is still in its pilot stages but offers scope for development. It was suggested that perhaps catchments with small populations (such as the NT) could assist others by demonstrating effective whole-of-government approaches to ICT policy and facilitation in support of civil society.

## **Other major issues raised in the consultation, with library implications**

Other major issues raised in the Consultations, and of interest to libraries, follow.

### **Ensuring that socio-economic status is not a barrier**

Digital divides still exist, notably for young and old, people with disabilities, and many indigenous people. The need is not just for access to ICT, but perhaps more importantly to achieve effective levels of use of ICT.

Libraries in Australia and in many other countries are contributing in this area, but the Consultation believed there were gaps and overlaps, and no security of expectation from one Australian jurisdiction to another. Funding was characterised by stop-go responses. Agencies such as libraries should be enabled to provide consistently state-of-the-art services, with an ever-richer array of content, in the manner that IFLA pleads:

IFLA advocates a global information commons through which all people will be enabled to seek and impart information. Its realisation requires, at a minimum, ubiquitous access to sufficient affordable bandwidth, up to date and affordable ICTs, unrestricted multilingual access to information and skills development programs to enable all to both access information and disseminate their own while respecting the fundamental right of human beings to both access and express information without restriction.<sup>21</sup>

## **The role of volunteers**

The perception among many participants in the Consultation was that the role of volunteers was not well understood or regulated. In relation to ICT in civil society, the role of volunteers needed clarification and codification, perhaps through a volunteers' charter.

Libraries were among the civil society institutions seen as requiring a more comprehensive and consistent approach to the use of volunteers.

## **Triple Bottom Line accountability**

ICT activity in all sectors was seen as having economic, environmental, social impacts – and also governance impacts. It was felt that social and environmental effects should be on every spreadsheet, as public good is the key concern of civil society. Libraries like other civil society organisations should set an example in demonstrating economic, environmental and social responsibility in their own use of ICT (and many other areas) and assist others to do the same.

In economic terms, the triple bottom line demonstrates accountability and efficiency in the stewardship of financial resources and private or public assets: integrity and the absence of corrupt behaviours are essential in situations of public trust. In social or human terms, the triple bottom line demonstrates care for people, whether staff, users or members of the wider community. As argued by Florida (2004, 2005) a stimulating, caring community attracts and develops the kind of people who make organisations and communities thrive.

In environmental terms, green organisational and community practices, including not least the environmentally responsible disposal of obsolete computer equipment, ultimately makes for more sustainable, cost-effective work and home lives, again promoting well-being for citizens and the community as a whole.

## **Issues at the intersection of government, business and civil society**

A serious concern by participants in the consultation was 'What aspects of the knowledge society can best be supported by governments and civil society organisations, and what aspects can be served by the market?' While the market should be encouraged to address need wherever possible, policies that 'leave it all to the market' will result in continuing or new digital divides, and digital exclusion for disadvantaged citizens.

As with other civil society organisations, libraries need to develop the value propositions and business models that ensure the most constructive relationships between publicly and privately provided services. They have carved out a 'neutral space' for themselves, which is cherished by many.<sup>22</sup>

## **Security and interoperability**

These conditions are needed to achieve trust and synergies, within and among community organisations, and between the three sectors. A constantly evolving, well-organised, interoperable network of reliable information resources needs to underpin e-democracy. Such resources need to cover every aspect of living, working, learning and community memory. To achieve this, the civic information network needs to elicit and aggregate information

resources from civil society and government as well as business. The 'wild Web' is an invaluable asset, but in parallel the deliberate creation of secure, authenticated, quality-assured civic information resources is still essential for the development of e-democracy and the knowledge society.

Libraries have been at the forefront of some of the most notable developments in secure interoperability – the MARC standard being a major historical example, and services such as the Web archive PANDORA<sup>23</sup> and the Picture Australia<sup>24</sup>, which offers single point searching of a wide range of picture collections, representing the cutting edge. Libraries need constantly to support efforts towards networked security and interoperability.

### **The challenge of keeping pace**

With ICT, users never 'arrive' at a point where they have learnt all that there is to know for decisions about adoption or non-adoption, or how to implement. Many community organisations are under-resourced for innovation decisions.

Libraries can play a powerful role in helping their constituents 'keep pace'. In the first decade or more of the World Wide Web, VICNET, based at the State Library of Victoria, provided an excellent example of the mentoring and support to public libraries throughout Victoria. Public libraries could play a greater role in assisting community organisations and individuals to keep up with changes in ICT, and decide when or when not to commit to a new technology or product. Objective purchasing advice for hardware and software, and service assistance, are service areas ripe for the picking in Australia.<sup>25</sup>

### **Maintaining the technology base**

Even with relatively stable technologies, there is a major lack of servicing of ICT for civil society organisations. Often community organisations cannot cope, for example with connection faults and viruses. With appropriate organisation, resources and partnerships libraries could be providing a good deal of help in this area. Such a service is operating in person, online and by phone, in Mildura, Victoria, thanks to VICNET and the Networking The Nation program from DCITA, but more are needed. Western Murray Online and Mobile offers to provide impartial advice to any group on 'anything relating to using technology more efficiently', including setting up and maintaining computer systems and networks, training and instruction on computer issues, web page design and Internet instruction.<sup>26</sup>

### **Technical standardisation and representation in standard-setting processes**

Big business and big government want operational efficiency on a broad scale, but those who are excluded from the process often pay a high price in conforming to standards set by others. Better community sector representation is needed in standards governing technology development and deployment. Also there is a need for standards appropriate to the civil society sector. Community organisations require simple, open, equitable, transparent solutions. Acting collectively and in partnership with others, there is every chance that libraries could be of considerable assistance to community-based organisations in this area. Such has been the experience of the tiny new library at the National University of East Timor with Australian and international assistance.<sup>27</sup>

## **Difficulties with the market and Internet environment**

Trends such as multinational monopolies, and treaties like the US-Australia Free Trade Agreement, can threaten the production of local content, especially in emergent contexts such as digital television. Other challenges are: security, privacy, spam, freedom of information, viruses, hacking, pornography, surveillance, shared health information, online standard contracts, and conflicting cross-border e-commerce legislation.

Libraries, in alliance with other civil society stakeholders, should consistently monitor, critique, and advocate. To the credit of the Australian Library and Information Association, and the International Federation of Library Associations, much valuable work in this area is already being done:

As a voice for the 2.5 billion registered library users across the world and an ECOSOC accredited international professional organisation, IFLA is available to assist with the development of effective models for Internet governance.<sup>28</sup>

## **The need for on-going research**

There was strong consensus among participants in the consultation that too little research was taking place on ICT in civil society, especially research which genuinely engaged practitioners, users, public servants and politicians at all levels as well as academics. The kind sentiment expressed by Bollier (2004) in respect of the 'information commons' resonated for many of themes touched upon in the consultation, namely that the issues are under-theorised, under-modelled:

The problem is that we have no recognised language for discussing the importance of commons in our culture. There is no well-developed discourse that explains the value of an open information environment.

## **Recommendations arising, with comments on their implications for libraries**

It must be emphasised that the *Draft Strategy* represents no more than step along the way'. It was always intended by DCITA to be one input to a range of policy and briefing documents under development, not a stand-alone report. However, the richness of the data from the consultation, and the need to key the outputs of the process to the *Strategic Framework* (Australia 2004), led to the creation of the following recommendations.

The recommendations were framed from the analysis of the consultation supplemented by documentary information, were offered in the context of the relevant strategies of the *Framework for the Information Economy 2004-2006* enumerated in the first section of this paper. Comments on library implications are offered in italics with each recommendation.

- i. Ensure that Commonwealth, State and Local Governments have clearly identifiable, well funded, Information Society Offices (ISOs), capable of mobilising whole-of-government, and inter-governmental, facilitation of ICT projects and programs relating to civil society. ISO agenda should include a) authentic community consultative

processes b) strong and on-going research programs through research networks including, but not confined to, universities and civil society organisations, and c) support for international co-operative action and benchmarking. *This would make the ICT policy and governance environment in Australia much more comprehensible and predictable to libraries and all their stakeholders in Australia.*

- ii. Foster the development of Australia as a knowledge society through ISO incentives and facilitation for multi-sector, ICT supported programs a) to create, elicit and share public knowledge, and b) to build societal memory, through enhancement of libraries, archives and other knowledge institutions, and through the development of new institutional forms for creation and sharing of public knowledge (e.g. VICNET, communitybuilders.nsw, Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association, Environment Victoria, Copyright Council). *With this kind of charter, libraries could confidently frame strategies and plans for their crucial role in building the knowledge society.*
- iii. Codify National, State and Local Government Civil Society Standards for ICT Literacy, Information and Content, Access, Infrastructure, Support, and Evaluation (LIAISE). Ensure that these are sustainably implemented through an appropriate combination of government, business and civil society action. *Library-based programs would benefit greatly from mutual understandings with other civil society constituencies arising from a framework of formative standards, and an emerging community of practice.*
- iv. Ensure that socio-economic status is not a barrier to participation in the knowledge society. Guided by the LIAISE standards, ISOs should continuously monitor, and take action to ensure, that public access facilities in telecentres or multifunction agencies such as the NTLIS Knowledge Centres are funded, equipped and staffed to enable all Australians to benefit from ICT enabled interaction and knowledge sharing, locally or at a distance, irrespective of personal financial circumstances, age, disability, ethnicity or geographical remoteness. *This would validate and reinforce principles already well accepted in the library world, and support their implementation in practice. A few days before WISES, IFLA met at the Alexandria Library in Egypt to develop a manifesto which included this statement:*

*IFLA is vitally concerned to promote multilingual content, cultural diversity and the special needs of Indigenous peoples, minorities and those with disabilities.*<sup>29</sup>

- v. As part of a research priority facilitated by ISOs and of the LIAISE standards agenda, create a 'Volunteers Charter' clarifying the role of volunteers in projects and programs relating to ICT and civil society. *Effective and efficient use of volunteers would benefit libraries alongside many other types of civil society organisations, and provide a better industrial environment, including recruitment, training and recognition, for the volunteers.*
- vi. Principles from relevant international charters such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights and International Association of Media and Communications Researchers (IAMCR) 'Charter for Knowledge Societies' should be integrated into the LIAISE standards. *Many of these principles already underlie library policy and practice, but if better recognised by relevant funding authorities, could be more strongly used in support of library policies, plans and budgets.*

- vii. Through the ISOs, and as part of LIAISE, specify and promote the concept of ‘triple bottom line’ (economic, environmental, social) accountability for ICT projects and programs in government, business and civil society. Undertake this as part of an ongoing campaign to demonstrate that digital inclusion provides business with better staff and customers, as well as benefiting the environment and the lives of citizens. *To be a focal point for community well-being, libraries should join with others in fostering triple bottom line philosophies and practices, reinforcing sustainability, trust and confidence in the community.*
- viii. On the basis of research commissioned by the ISOs, and standards developed under LIAISE, identify what aspects of the knowledge society can best be supported by governments and civil society organisations, and what aspects can be served by the market. Design program and project templates for ISOs to ensure that market-based provision is maximised, and that all other needs are covered by not-for-profit provision. *This is a vital issue for libraries in defining their own role, and in building appropriate partnerships.*
- ix. Include security and interoperability for ICT in civil society as high-order issues in the codification of LIAISE standards, and their implementation. *Libraries are already leaders in the area of formative standards for information practice. Nevertheless working within a wider, stronger community of practice would help both themselves and others.*
- x. Support the development of civil society based emergency response networks. *The library as a core community institution should have a clear role in the context of emergency response, especially as regards protection of information resources -- whether in physical or virtual form -- vital to people’s lives.*
- xi. Specify interoperability for ICT in civil society as a high priority in the multi-sector program work of the ISOs, and the standard setting agenda of LIAISE. *Same comment as on ix above.*
- xii. Specify innovation culture for ICT in civil society as a high priority in the multi-sector program work of the ISOs (i.e. capacity to innovate, or consciously decide not to innovate, on cost-benefit considerations). *Libraries could, in partnership with others, help their communities better understand both the benefits and risks of innovation, and assist especially with the informational aspects of innovation.*
- xiii. ISOs should ensure that both Australian and international research capabilities are used as appropriate in addressing priority issues relating to ICT and civil society. ISO research facilitation should specify that research on ICT and civil society must articulate with standard funding levels and procedures of the Australian Research Council (ARC), and other Australian and international research funding authorities. *Libraries are among the many civil society organisations needing more and better research on their role and potential, including approaches to evaluation.*
- xiv. Specify the development of research networks for ICT in civil society as a priority in the multi-sector program work of the ISOs, and in their facilitation of international collaboration. Such networks should as far as possible include stakeholders from government, business and international organisations, as well as Australian universities

and civil society organisations. *Libraries are an essential part of such networks, both as contributors and beneficiaries.*

- xv. Within the action framework of WSIS, ISOs should provide incentives to assist the development of ICT in civil society across the Asia Pacific region, and in other regions where Australia is active in development or humanitarian aid, through collaborative action-research leading to local empowerment, preferably in collaboration with NGOs such as FDC (Foundation for Development Co-operation) and APC (Association for Progressive Communications). *While libraries have fostered international relationships for decades, the Asia Pacific region could unquestionably benefit from more interchange of library expertise, not least at the community level.*
- xvi. Ensure that knowledge bases in the civil society sector can both contribute to, and benefit from, agendas to raise Australian public sector productivity, collaboration and accessibility through the effective use of information, knowledge and ICT. The development of appropriate information architectures and information management practices should be part of the research agenda facilitated by the ISOs, and the standards building agenda under LIAISE. *Libraries would both benefit and contribute to such a community of practice.*
- xvii. ISOs in collaboration with civil society organisations should continuously seek ways in which use of ICT can strengthen the participation of citizens in government process (e-democracy) through research, pilot schemes, and scaling up of models proved to be successful. There should be constant monitoring of convergent views as well as unique views in developing and implementing governance measures in civil society. *With appropriate partnerships, libraries could play an ever-increasing part in facilitating ICT in support of citizen participation.*
- xviii. Ensure that governance and business arrangements in the civil society sector both can contribute to, and benefit from, agendas to improve accountability, efficiency, transparency and integration in the Australian public sector. The development of appropriate information architectures and information management practices should be part of the research agenda facilitated by the ISOs, and the standards building agenda under LIAISE. *See comment under vii.*
- xix. Ensure that knowledge bases in the civil society sector both can contribute to, and benefit from, an agenda to develop an Australian Government ICT investment and interoperability framework to support integrated services. The development of appropriate information architectures and information management practices should be part of the research agenda facilitated by the ISOs, and the standards building agenda under LIAISE. *Seamless and mutually supportive information architectures in the public and private sectors would assist libraries and many other community organisations to benefit from the rich information resources routinely gathered by government departments.*
- xx. Significantly increase the level of activity of the Online Ministers Council, Local Government and Planning Ministers Council, and the Cultural Ministers Council in relation to ICT and civil society. Foster intensive and frequent interaction between the ISOs and these councils. *The Online Ministers Council and the other bodies mentioned are crucial for the future role of libraries in relation to ICT and information resources.*

*DCITA has just proposed the formation of a National Nonprofit ICT Coalition (NNIC),<sup>30</sup> which should include libraries countrywide.*

In summary, the list of recommendations reflects two key strategic needs arising from the consultation:

- a) a reliable and sustained capacity on the part of government to hear the diverse voices of civil society, and to respond to these on a whole-of-government and inter-government basis, and
- b) a process for the on-going development of standards to guide ICT application and use across Australian civil society, focussing on literacy, information and content, access, infrastructure, support and evaluation (LIAISE), including the maximisation of synergies at the international level. To the extent that any of the recommendations influence the development of Australian ICT policy, libraries should be core players in the unfolding scenario.

What can individuals and libraries do to help resolve these pervasive issues? Some practical suggestions were provided at the most recent IFLA conference. Every participant was asked to consider these challenging questions, which are just as appropriate today:<sup>31</sup>

1. What are the three major issues facing libraries and access to information in your country or region?
2. What is one action that you have taken in the last year which has improved access to information?
3. What are two or three concrete actions which could be taken over the next 18 months for improvement in your country? Who would be responsible? Who should provide the resources? How will you ensure that this will happen?

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