



Inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network

Submission by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network
to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure and
Communications



February 2011



The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is the peak body that represents all consumers on communications issues including telecommunications, broadband and emerging new services. ACCAN provides a strong unified voice to industry and government as consumers work towards availability, accessibility and affordability of communications services for all Australians.

Consumers need ACCAN to promote better consumer protection outcomes ensuring speedy responses to complaints and issues. ACCAN aims to empower consumers so that they are well informed and can make good choices about products and services. As a peak body, ACCAN will activate its broad and diverse membership base to campaign to get a better deal for all communications consumers.

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Overview

ACCAN welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network. ACCAN believes the NBN has the potential to contribute in a significant way to the goals listed in the inquiry's Terms of Reference.

Our response is informed by the four guiding principles we have adopted on broadband policy.

- High quality, affordable broadband for all Australians.
- No consumer should be worse off during the transition and following the implementation of the NBN.
- Robust consumer protection rules must be built-in to the NBN regulatory framework.
- The broadband services market should be competitive and fair.

We view the NBN as having the potential to open up new opportunities for the most disadvantaged people in our community and to create a range of new educational and economic benefits as the effect of geographic isolation is reduced. As several other submissions to the Inquiry have already pointed out, there will be new possibilities for improved healthcare delivery particularly to rural and regional areas.

Small business in particular stands to gain from access to new markets. A range of new small business opportunities will become viable with ubiquitous, high-speed broadband. These may enhance social inclusion and employment participation of marginalised groups, such as indigenous people and people with disabilities.

The research work of organisations such as the Institute for a Broadband-Enabled Society at the University of Melbourne indicate that health, education and the delivery of government services generally will be key areas where high-speed broadband will make a difference to people's lives.

In order to realise these aspirations and reach the goals identified in Terms of Reference (a) through (h), there are a number of key enabling policies that need to be in place.

Ubiquity

Most of the potential benefits of high-speed broadband in the delivery of health, education and other government services can only be achieved if the network is truly ubiquitous and connects the vast majority of premises nation-wide.

Rollout policy should therefore ensure that the maximum number of premises are connected at the time of the initial rollout. Three important steps would be:

- ensure that initial installations are free for end-users;
- ensure that the initial installation consent process is 'opt-out'; and
- ensure that there is a community awareness strategy including a public information campaign explaining the NBN rollout and the benefits of being connected.

ACCAN has prepared a position statement, available on our web site, which outlines the case for an opt-out consent process for the NBN fibre rollout.

Computer literacy policies

As the submission from Port Macquarie Hastings Council notes, a potential barrier to widespread community benefit is lack of familiarity and comfort with the use of the technology. The Council's proposal for free broadband community centres to lower the knowledge and awareness barriers to computer and internet usage is a valuable idea and should be implemented nation-wide.

Following the example of South Korea over a decade ago, there should be free or subsidised computer skills training available and promoted to key groups. In South Korea, training programs and subsidised computers reached people with disabilities, mothers, children and military personnel through the "Ten Million People Internet Education Project" (2000-2002) and the "One Million Housewife Digital Literacy Education Project" (1999).¹ It is widely acknowledged that these efforts led to an increase in demand for broadband services.

In Australia, similar programs might target seniors, school teachers, newly arrived migrants, regional centres and remote indigenous communities.

Applications for people with disabilities

High-speed broadband can be used to greatly enhance quality of life for people with disabilities. New and existing services are able to be implemented on a much wider scale and become more easily accessible.

As a recent report commissioned by ACCAN has shown, benefits of high-speed broadband for people with disabilities include: TV 'access service' applications such as audio description and signing; TV-based videophones; medical services; lip-reading possibilities; video-relay services; video remote interpreting; talking books; converting printed text to the spoken word; smart living or remote monitoring applications.²

¹Kenji Kushida and Seung-Youn Oh, 'The Political Economies of Broadband Development in Korea and Japan', *Asian Survey*, Vol.47, issue 3 2007, p.497; Dal Yong Jin, 'Socioeconomic Implications of Broadband Services: Information economy in Korea', *Information, Communication & Society* Vol. 8, No.4, December 2005, p.509

² *Broadband Solutions for Consumers with Disabilities*, 2010. Report for ACCAN by Jim Slater, Jan-Ingvar Lindstrom and Gunela Astbrink.



Government should focus on supporting the development and implementation of these types of applications. Government action will be required as the private sector tends to be reluctant to introduce new services of benefit to people with disabilities when there are uncertainties about their likely take-up and commercial viability.

This support could include providing more resourcing for not-for-profit and community service delivery organisations, recognising the crucial brokering role they play for many vulnerable consumers.