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Community Domain Name Policy Development

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Abstract

In August 2006, auDA launched a new domain name space designed specifically for community groups to develop community websites for the benefit of the local community. This paper presents an overview of the scheme, and identifies the changes made to the governing policies since they were initially proposed. A comparison of the proposed and implemented policies is presented, and the potential effects of these changes on a 'world first' community website scheme are considered. The changes made by the administrators to the scheme were in the following areas: local focus; sale of geographic .com.au and .net.au domains; management and licensing; website management groups; marketing and publicity; state and national portals; fourth level domains; and licensing costs. Test case communities' responses to the issues are also considered.

Keywords

Community, Website, Community Geographic Domain Names, Policy

Introduction

The Australian Domain Name Administrators (auDA) publicly launched Community Geographic Domain Names (CGDNs) in 2006. These new domain names follow a suburb.state/territory.au format (for example wollongong.nsw.au, ballarat.vic.au) as opposed to the traditional .com.au, .net.au and .gov.au suffixes to which Internet users are accustomed. The CGDNs were developed to provide community members with the opportunity to develop community websites that benefited the entire local community. However, a lack of response to the needs and voices of the community has jeopardised this international first – domain names just for local communities.

Through extensive consultation with grassroots community groups, a proposal for the establishment of a 'community only' domain name space was submitted to auDA in 2002. auDA permitted a trial of these community domain names based on policy and guidelines established in the proposal. The purpose of the trial was to test the policy, and implement modifications based on the experiences of participating communities. However, during and after the trial process auDA made numerous modifications to the policy, guidelines and associated processes without consultation with the trial communities. Community feedback was marginalised and in some cases the changes made were in direct contrast to community advice.

Social inclusion is essential in this process, with each CGDN Website expected to represent all interests within the local community (.au Community Domains Trust 2006a). The concept of CGDNs was initially proposed by Australian community groups because they sought a facility for communities to identify themselves on the Internet and to alleviate concerns about commercial organisations effectively controlling any domains that identified communities. From its inception to the national CGDN launch, the policy and rules governing the CGDN Scheme changed significantly.

While the initial proposal had received wide community support, there has been slow uptake of the CGDNs since the national launch in August 2006. This paper will explain the initial goals the CGDN Scheme, discuss the changes made to this scheme, and consider how these changes have impacted on the experiences of the communities and the level of social benefit and social inclusion achieved.

Defining Communities

The domain under evaluation is that of a community website scheme, specifically the CGDN Scheme launched in Australia in 2006. However, in order to understand the domain it is necessary to have an understanding of what is meant by 'community'. 'Community' can be based on different factors in different circumstances: it may be based on geography, an interest or both. While there is no agreed definition of a 'community' (Benassi, Di Cindio & Ripamonti 2004, 16; Butcher 1993, 3), it has been established that the term refers to a group of

individuals, with the only common concept throughout all definitions of an online community being people (Preece 2004). Inherent in descriptions of communities is the need for these individuals to have something in common (Butcher 1993, 12). Members of geographic communities are classified as such based on their shared geographical location, or physical proximity to one another (Butcher 1993, 12). Writers have often used the term 'community' to describe a group of people within a certain geographical area. This use of the term implies that individuals have a shared social base simply because they reside in a similar location. This assumption is not always accurate (Butcher 1993, 13). The CGDN Scheme attempts to develop a shared social base for the community based around geography.

Despite the variety of definitions of 'community' proposed by researchers (Adler 1997; Butcher 1993; Day 2002; Stoecker 2005), it has been suggested that often the definitions provided are focussed too closely on internal community cohesion, and so do not acknowledge the importance of individual commitment and participation in a network (Crow and Allan, 1994 in O'Neil 2002, 81). Some researchers argue that an online community can facilitate the re-development of internal social networks and support interaction between community members (O'Neil 2002, 81). The CGDN proposal considered the development of local social networks to be an important goal of the scheme.

Gurstein advises that, while technology projects can be used to enhance community interaction and prosperity, they can also lead to division among community members. To be successful, an online community requires close links to the existing offline economic community, as well as strong leadership able to unite the community as a whole (Gurstein 1999 in O'Neil 2002, 82). O'Neil goes on further by stating that "[d]iscussion of community arose out of concern about the transition from agrarian to urbanized industrial societies" (O'Neil 2002, 81). For this study it is important to consider the role and concerns of the communities involved in the CGDN trial.

History of the CGDN Scheme

Three submissions were made to auDA in 2002, proposing a new domain name space solely for community use. Each submission outlined the writer's preferred structure and management procedures for these domains. The first submission was dismissed because it did not provide documented support from relevant stakeholders and had a lack of community focus. The other two submissions, from cBallarat with the City of Ballarat, and the One City One Site (OCOS) Working Party, were very similar (.au Domain Administration 2006b). The OCOS Working Party spent over two years developing the CGDN Scheme, and had received ongoing feedback from auDA's Name Policy Advisory Panel and auDA's New Names Advisory Panel during this time (.au Domain Administration 2006a). The New Names Advisory Panel approved the ideas proposed by cBallarat and OCOS, and gave support to the domain name structure (.au Domain Administration 2006b).

Based on advice from OCOS and the New Names Advisory Panel, the auDA Board acknowledged that much of the operational detail of the proposed CGDNs could only be resolved in practice. Responsibility for operational processes was allocated to the National Reference Group in conjunction with auDA (.au Domain Administration 2002a). The first meeting of the National Reference Group was held on August 29, 2003 (.au Domain Administration 2003). To ensure that the CGDN Policies were comprehensive, a trial of the CGDNs, managed by OCOS, was approved (.au Domain Administration 2002a).

CGDN Trial Communities

Test case management responsibilities were assumed by the New South Wales Office of Information and Communications Technology, under the banner of the One City One Site (OCOS) project. Three test cases participated in the trial of the CGDNs. Three case studies were used because when only a single case study is observed, it is difficult to generalise the results (Yin, 1991 in Miles & Huberman 1994). Observing three communities allowed common experiences to be identified and varied perspectives recorded. Using communities with varied sizes, motivations and support mechanisms meant that the implications of the policy could be seen in different circumstances.

The first test case was established in the regional city of Bathurst and facilitated by the manager of the OCOS project in Bathurst. Another test case was based in the city of Wollongong, and facilitated by researchers with experience in community technology projects at the University of Wollongong. The third test case was facilitated by cBallarat in Ballarat. The trial began in 2004, with the community groups formed between March 2004 and June 2004. Table 1 below shows the characteristics of the community groups used in this study.

Table 1: Test case community characteristics

	Bathurst	Ballarat	Wollongong
Location	NSW, Australia	Victoria, Australia	NSW, Australia
Description	Medium-sized country town	Large country city	Large regional city
Population	30,000 residents	85,000 residents	200,000 residents
Initiation	Initiated and supported by state government body located in the community	Initiated and run by organisation answerable to local council	Initiated and supported by local university

Each test case undertook the process of forming a community group, and developing a community website, based on the processes outlined in the CGDN proposal.

Recording Community Experiences & Feedback

Using a case study methodology (Myers 2005) the experiences of the test cases involved in the trial were researched through independent and objective observation. Case study research is interpretive research (Creswell 2003), and requires that the researcher become familiar with the participants and the environment in which they operate, before analysing “the data for themes or issues” (Creswell 2003). A case study approach involves detailed research to describe and understand an event, an activity, a process, a program, an individual or a group of individuals (the ‘test case’) (Creswell 2003; Stake 1995) using “a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time” (Stake, 1995 in Creswell 2003, 15). Each test case must have clear time and activity boundaries (Creswell 2003; Holloway 1997), however it is often difficult to define the boundaries between the test case and its context (Yin in Myers 2005). Using a case study approach allowed the issues that impacted on the success and sustainability of the CGDN Websites and their management groups to be identified within their real-life context, without having to pre-define the boundaries of the research (Yin 2003).

Data was collected and analysed over a three-year period included all four qualitative data types (observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials), thus providing a detailed description of the test case experiences (Creswell 2003). This approach of triangulating from multiple sources has been deemed to be the most effective method for evaluating community projects involving information technology (Myers 2005; O’Neil 2002). The data that has been used in this study includes: published documentation; test case reports; community surveys; meeting transcripts, minutes and observation; interviews with key stakeholders; and reviews of the community websites. The CGDN application process for test case communities required each community group to complete three reports about their progress and experiences during the formation and planning phases. In conjunction with this research, researchers at the University of Wollongong compiled information from all these sources, and reported to auDA on the experiences of the community groups and resulting recommendations (ETHOS 2004). Researchers supplied this feedback to inform CGDN Policy changes.

While previous research in the Community Informatics field has conducted case studies on the development and success of community websites, this is the first research to compare multiple communities each attempting to develop a community website under consistent guidelines. A comparison of the experiences of multiple test cases will add confidence to the findings of this research, and may help to explain why different communities have varied levels of success with their websites (Yin, 1991 in Miles & Huberman 1994). This process of observing multiple cases to confirm and explain results is often referred to as replication (Miles & Huberman 1994, 29).

This research occurs in a natural setting, and involves ‘typical’ situations that represent the ‘real’ experiences of the participants and community (Creswell 2003, 181; Miles & Huberman 1994, 6). Qualitative methods for research in a natural setting include open-ended questioning, interviews, questionnaires, observation, recording the researcher’s impressions and reactions, and documentary analysis. Documents can include published and unpublished documents, archival data, audiovisual data, images, company reports, private communications, and newspaper articles (Creswell 2003; Myers 2005). Many of the methods listed above are used to develop an understanding of the ‘inside’ perceptions of the individuals involved, and can only be captured through attentiveness to the individuals speech and behaviour, empathetic understanding, and an ability for the researcher to suspend preconceptions while interacting with the individuals (Miles & Huberman 1994, 6). A variety of these methods and document types were used to record the experiences of the test case participants and the changes made to the CGDN Policy.

Common themes and related issues experienced by all three test cases were identified from the comprehensive range of data collected from the communities. This information was used to better understand the issues faced, and identify relationships between the issues. In many cases, the test case participants developed feasible

solutions to the issues faced. Issues that are likely to impact on the sustainability of the community websites and the scheme are discussed below.

Proposed vs. Implemented CGDN Scheme

The following section reports on the proposed implementation of the CDGN scheme, compared to the version of the CGDN Scheme that was implemented when the domain names were publicly launched in August 2006. Changes in the scheme in the following areas are reviewed: local focus; sale of geographic .com.au and .net.au domains; management and licensing; website management groups; marketing and publicity; state and national portals; fourth level domains; and licensing costs. The initial proposal is presented, followed by the implemented version of the CGDN Scheme. The test case communities' responses to the issue (and specifically to the changes made to the proposal) are then presented.

Local Focus

Proposal

The CGDN Scheme was designed to support and enhance local communities, with each website management group working with local businesses and community groups to maximise the benefits for all involved and keeping them within the local community. The CGDN management body would assist community groups to establish relationships with local organisations, and website content was to be limited to local information and advertising.

Implementation

A national sponsorship deal was signed to provide financial support for the CGDN management body (not to the local website management groups). This national approach was in direct contrast to the 'local community' focus used as the basis for developing the CGDN Scheme.

Community Response

Members of the Bathurst and Wollongong test case community groups were strongly opposed to the arrangement of a national sponsor, because they believed that this was against the grassroots philosophy that had been the initial principle of OCOS. They believed that the resources invested in signing this sponsor should have been used to promote the CGDN Scheme, thereby assisting each community to gain local sponsors.

Sale of Geographic .com.au & .net.au Domains

Proposal

auDA supported the CGDN proposal "in order to preserve Australian geographic names for use by the relevant community" (auDA National Reference Group 2003). The CGDN Scheme was necessary because the registration of .com.au and .net.au domain names that used geographic locations was prohibited by auDA. Community feedback gathered during the development of the OCOS proposal determined that community members did not support the release of geographic .com.au and .net.au domains, suggesting it would be too confusing to have both CGDNs and commercial names released at a similar time.

Implementation

The concept of selling geographic names in the .com.au and .net.au name spaces was discussed when approving a trial of the CGDN proposal. In 2002, the Geographic Names Board recommended no change to the restrictions on geographic .com.au and net.au domain names (.au Domain Administration 2002b), while the auDA Panel were in favour of removing the restrictions (.au Domain Administration 2002b). Despite promoting the CGDNs as valuable because they had exclusive access to Australian domain names linked to geographic locations, auDA stated that "once a system for community use of geographic domain names is implemented, there is no longer good reason to maintain the restriction on the use of geographic names in com.au and net.au." (auDA New Names Advisory Panel 2002) The issue was again raised in 2003, with the New Names Advisory Panel failing to make a recommendation (auDA New Names Advisory Panel 2003).

Despite the lack of commitment to a position, auDA chose to lift the restrictions on the use of .com.au and .net.au domain names that used geographic locations. These names were sold in 2005 at premium prices, prior to the release of the CGDNs.

Community Response

Feedback from members of the Bathurst and Wollongong test cases was submitted through auDA's public consultation on the sale of these domains, opposing the removal of the restrictions. The Intergovernmental

Committee for Geographical Names in Australasia also encouraged auDA to maintain the restrictions (Committee for Geographical Names in Australasia 2006). Despite numerous submissions from members of the public supporting the restrictions, auDA ignored community feedback.

The sale of these domain names impacted negatively on both the morale of the test case community members and the value of the CGDNs. Community members were angry that auDA had chosen to ignore other funding concepts proposed by community members and OCOS staff. auDA resources were diverted from the CGDNs to the geographic .com.au and .net.au sales for many months, causing delays to the national launch of the CGDN Scheme. The negative impacts of this situation were experienced by all three test cases.

The sale of geographic domains in the .com.au and .net.au name spaces has devalued the CGDNs. CGDNs were initially created because the geographic domains in the .com.au and .net.au name spaces were not available. The release of these domains can be seen as defeating the purpose of creating CGDNs.

CGDN Management & Licensing

Proposal

An OCOS Management Authority was to be established in each Australian state and territory, with all Authorities coordinated by a National Reference Group. This National Reference Group would be accountable to auDA. Each Authority would assume responsibility for managing the allocation and use of the CGDNs, conducting marketing campaigns, and assisting communities with the application process. The OCOS Management Authorities would conduct an initial assessment of applications for CGDNs, and when these applications were satisfactory they would be submitted for final approval by a national Independent Assessment Panel (auDA New Names Advisory Panel 2002).

Implementation

auDA established the .au Community Domains Trust (auCD) in 2005. auCD is responsible for the management and sale of CGDNs nationally. The auCD Manager has full control over approval of CGDN applications, and there is no independent review process. While described as 'independent', auCD maintains a close relationship with auDA. The Chair of the auCD Board is also the Chair of the auDA Board; two of the four auCD Board members are auDA Board members; and another auCD Board member is an auDA employee (.au Community Domains Trust 2006b; .au Domain Administration 2007). One of the members of both Boards was also Chairman of the Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping from 2002 to 2004, which is the body that manages the place names used as the basis for the CGDNs.

There is no documented process for managing the use of active CGDNs.

Community Response

The test cases received little support from auDA and auCD. This was in contrast to the experiences with the OCOS body, which strongly supported all test cases. It is likely that greater support, as initially proposed, would have increased CGDN uptake.

The auCD General Manager fostered an attitude of competition with OCOS, rather than working with the OCOS staff to minimise transitional issues and rapidly gain an understanding of the CGDN Scheme. In March 2006, the auCD General Manager requested that the Wollongong test case remove all OCOS references and links from the Wollongong community temporary website. At this time, the OCOS website was the only comprehensive source of CGDN Scheme information, and no auCD website existed.

Of the 12 active CGDNs in April 2007, three were not using the CGDN "solely for the purpose of operating a community website" (.au Domain Administration 2006c), as required by the policy. No action has been taken by auCD to rectify this situation.

Website Management Groups

Proposal

To be eligible to license a CGDN, the registrant must be a legally registered, not-for-profit group, and be representative of the local community (auDA National Reference Group 2003). With the exception of existing groups established for community ICT projects, all groups should be newly formed. An individual or single entity was not able to license a CGDN (auDA National Reference Group 2003). A minimum of eight members was required for a community group to be recognised (auDA National Reference Group 2003). Each CGDN applicant group must demonstrate that they have widely promoted the CGDN application within the local community, and allowed all community members the opportunity to join the applicant group.

Implementation

auDA altered the proposed management group requirements, stating that: “Although geographic domain names are intended to be allocated for community-based, non-commercial use, the registrant does not necessarily have to be a non-profit community organisation. The registrant might be a company or individual acting on behalf of the community. The main consideration is whether there is a sufficient degree of community control over the registrant.” (.au Domain Administration 2002b)

This change was made to allow cBallarat to act as the management group for one of the test cases.

Community Response

Ballarat was the least successful of the three test cases, with low community participation and support. Community feedback suggested this may be due to previous failed ICT initiatives in the community. cBallarat’s close relationship to the local council was also cited as problematic for community members.

Marketing & Publicity

Proposal

The proposal, with support from auDA (auDA National Reference Group 2003), acknowledged the importance of ensuring public awareness of the CGDNs and implementing them in a way that maximised their public appeal. A national marketing campaign was integral to this plan. Recommendations from the University of Wollongong included the use of a variety of means, including public meetings, media releases and personal community with key stakeholders, over the long-term to ensure increased awareness of CGDNs in local communities.

Implementation

Despite plans for an extensive national promotion campaign to coincide with the national CGDN launch, this did not occur. A one-week travelling roadshow was undertaken; however this was not supported by a marketing campaign.

Community Response

Bathurst and Wollongong have stated that without a coordinated marketing campaign by auCD, it is unlikely that these domains will achieve a high level of awareness and use. Both of these community groups have struggled to obtain new members as citizens of these communities are unaware of the scheme.

State & National Portals

Proposal

The original OCOS model proposed that state/territory portals be established to provide a central access point for all CGDNs. This central access point would be a highly valued resource to disseminate information about CGDNs to local communities across Australia and provide access to customizable materials and resources for promoting CGDNs in local communities. A national portal was also suggested by test case community members. The national level portal was envisioned to resemble an interactive map of Australia with users able to click on different States or Territories to access the state/territory level portals.

Implementation

No state/territory or national portals have been developed or implemented. The auCD website is the only location where a comprehensive list of existing CGDNs can be found. This has not been publicized.

Community Response

Community groups must individually promote their community website, rather than relying on promotion of the CGDN Scheme. This requires communities to use their own limited resources, rather than auCD using funds allocated for this purpose.

Fourth-Level Domains

Proposal

No restrictions were placed on the use of fourth-level domains (sub-domains) (e.g. sport.wollongong.nsw.au) in the original proposal.

Implementation

Policy 3(d) states that that “The registrant must not create sub-domains within the CGDN for the purpose of issuing them to third parties” (.au Domain Administration 2006c). auCD had initially planned to restrict the creation and use of all sub-domains, however due to a strong negative reaction from test case members, community groups may create sub-domains for their own use.

Community Response

Despite auCD’s concession allowing community groups to create sub-domains for their own use, communities had also lobbied to allow the leasing of sub-domains to local community groups and businesses. Income from the leasing of these sub-domains had been included in the financial plans of two of the test cases. Discussions between the test cases and auCD did not result in a satisfactory explanation of these restrictions. auCD management indicated it was because auCD would lose control of the content on these sub-domains. The Policy changes were not conducted in accordance with auDA procedure, with no public consultation occurring. Based on research by Wollongong and Bathurst it is likely that, if challenged, the Policy would not be considered binding (although neither test case has the finances to challenge this).

Licensing Costs

Proposal

The OCOS proposal did not recommend a specific price for the sale of each CGDN, however the aim was to minimise the costs for community groups due to their compulsory non-profit status.

Implementation

At the time of launch, the cost of licensing a CGDN for 2 years was \$550 (.au Community Domains Trust 2006c). Three months later, the cost fell to approximately \$99 (.au Community Domains Trust 2006d).

Community Response

Prior to launch, auCD had received community feedback that the \$550 licence fee was too high, and true start-up non-profit organisations would not be able to afford it. However, auCD ignored this advice. auCD was forced to lower the price only three months after launch due to the low take-up of CGDNs.

National Implementation of the CDGN scheme

auCD Director Paul Harcombe spoke about the CGDN Scheme at the XXIII International FIG congress ‘Shaping the Change’, stating that “in a society which is becoming more hedonistic, technology dependent and with the gap widening between the “haves” and the “have-nots”, this new initiative can overcome isolation and bring communities together to function and interact as a cohesive group using the World Wide Web - which is ubiquitous” (Harcombe 2006).

The auCD administrators have stated that there are over 27,000 domain names that are available to Australian communities. However, the take-up of these domains has been relatively low, with only 12 active CGDNs in the first 10 months after launch (.au Community Domains Trust 2007). Some of the reasons for this low take-up have been highlighted in this paper, with the changes made to the proposed CGDN Policy potentially decreasing the value of the CGDN Scheme and of each CGDN. The community groups involved in the trial have stated that their feedback has been ignored, and that the CGDN Policy changes (e.g. the sale of the .com.au and .net.au domains) have been implemented to suit the administrators rather than considering the interests of the communities.

Another significant issue that has affected the national implementation of the CDGN Scheme is the delays that have occurred. These delays have been caused by CGDN Policy changes and the creation of auCD. Initially the CGDN proposal had significant community support; however, delays of more than three years reduced the enthusiasm of Australian communities.

Conclusion

The CGDN Scheme has great potential for communities to create an authentic voice over the Internet, using a domain name space that has been created specifically for their use. The original CGDN proposal was built on the desire to enhance social inclusion of all members of a geographical community by establishing a presence online. However, CGDN Policy changes made by the administrators of this process have potentially reduced the community benefit of this scheme, and these changes may ultimately lead to division among community members rather than enhancing community cohesion.

This study has reported on changes in the CGDN Scheme, based on extensive data collection across three case studies, in the following areas: local focus; sale of geographic .com.au and .net.au domains; management and licensing; website management groups; marketing and publicity; state and national portals; fourth level domains; and licensing costs. All of these changes have the potential to reduce the success of this scheme. Changes in policies by the administrators without regard to feedback from the test case communities are likely to be a significant reason for the low up-take of the CGDNs. To date only 12 communities in Australia have signed up for this scheme which has the potential to affect thousands of communities throughout the country.

The CGDN Scheme has the potential to be implemented by domain name administrators globally, providing domain name spaces for communities without commercial interference. However, the Australian implementation of CGDNs has identified numerous issues which must be resolved prior to any similar scheme being considered viable. These issues, largely attributable to the CGDN management bodies, are posing a significant threat to the success of the world's first geographic community-based domain name space.

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