

Community Geographic Domain Names

Alison Norris

University of Wollongong, Australia

INTRODUCTION

The Australian (.au) Domain Name Authority (auDA) announced the creation of Community Geographic Domain Names (CGDNs) in November, 2002 (auDA, 2005b). This scheme is novel because it restricts licensing and use of the CGDNs to community-based groups running community portals. The community group must demonstrate that they are representative of and inclusive of all local community members. The community portals displayed on CGDNs are required to reflect community interests, and may choose to cover cultural events, tourism, historical information, special interest groups and local business (auDA, 2005b).

BACKGROUND

The Community Geographic Domain Name (CGDN) title is derived from the characteristics of the scheme. A CGDN will be available for each suburb, as listed on the Australian postcode database. Each domain name will reflect the geographic location of its community using the structure `placename.state/territory.au`—for example, the CGDN for the town of Bathurst in the state of New South Wales will be `bathurst.nsw.au`. Eight new second level domains have been established for the use of the CGDN scheme, one for each Australian state and territory: `act.au`, `nsw.au`, `nt.au`, `qld.au`, `sa.au`, `tas.au`, `vic.au`, and `wa.au`.

CGDNs were developed in response to community requests for access to domain names that reflected their community. In 1997, the Australian domain name administrators (auDA) introduced restrictions to prohibit the licensing of all third-level domains (3LDs) that corresponded to Australian geographic locations in the `com.au` and `net.au` namespaces (auDA, 2004), meaning that communities were unable to license domain names that represented their geographic location. In an attempt to allow legitimate use of domain names that correspond to Australian geographic locations, auDA decided to establish a set of new second-level domains (2LDs) in 2002, to be used by geographic communities (auDA, 2005a). The purpose of the 2LDs was to allow each geographic community group to have access to a domain name that was representative of their physical location. It was seen as essential to ensure that the geographic domain names were licensed to groups within the community they represented, and were used for the benefit of the community.

Submissions from the public indicated a serious concern that these domain names would be used for commercial exploitation, rather than community-based activities. As a result of the issues raised, auDA decided to create a new set of 2LDs. Only domain names that represent geographical locations, as defined by the Australian postcode database (auDA, 2005b), may be licensed. Only not-for-profit organizations located in the geographic area corresponding to that domain name could apply for the license. These organizations must be representative and inclusive of that community, and the CGDN must be used for the benefit of the wider community (auDA National Reference Group, 2004). This ideal is becoming popular in community information and communication technology (ICT) projects internationally (Day & Cupidi, 2004).

auDA established the National Reference Group (NRG) in July, 2003, to play a high-level policy advisory role in the development of the CGDNs (auDA, 2005c). The NRG was responsible for overseeing three communities as they trialed the application and development process for CGDNs, with these experiences used to inform policy recommendations.

The CGDN scheme represents an innovative approach to community portals, by providing a clearly defined naming structure and strict conditions on the groups permitted to own and use a CGDN. As a result of the conditions imposed on CGDNs, the consistent naming structure, and the support from the official body, auDA, the CGDN scheme provides a high degree of credibility to any community portals developed under this scheme. While communities may choose to develop content for their community portal, it is expected that the CGDNs will act as a gateway to the wealth of resources already available within, and about, the local community. auDA policy specifies that the CGDNs must be developed for the benefit of all sections of the local community, by supporting and enhancing community-based activities and groups (auDA National Reference Group, 2004). Due to the non-profit limitations imposed on the namespace, the groups managing the CGDNs are likely to have limited funding. As a result of the close community links and the limited funds available, in most cases the CGDNs will minimise the resources required to develop content, eliminate duplication, and further strengthen ties with the community.

CGDNs are innovative because they will not receive government funding. This is a contrast to most community portals previously established in Australia, which have

received funding through government schemes (Australian Government, 2003a). Networking the Nation (NTN) was a scheme to facilitate community ICT initiatives. By June, 2000, 110 Web sites and portals had been developed under its funding, with 37% of these Web sites being community portals (Vrazalic & Hyland, 2005). However, this program did not result in sustainable projects. In one state, 130 ICT projects were funded, with 42 of these failing at a collective cost of AU\$24.6million (Australian Government, 2003b). Similar experiences of funding ICT initiatives have been recorded in a range of countries, including the USA and UK. These poor outcomes have prompted funding agencies to require greater accountability (GrantStation, 2004; London Advice Services Alliance, 2003). As a result of the high NTN failure rate, the Australian government determined that it was not viable to continue funding such projects, and determined that community information technology projects required greater planning and expert knowledge for success. Therefore, auDA and the Australian federal government require communities participating in the CGDN scheme to be self-funding. It is expected that communities will take greater responsibility for their community portal if they are funding it, and as a result a higher success rate is expected for the projects. Communities must also demonstrate detailed planning prior to being granted access to a CGDN.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CGDN SCHEME

The viability of the CGDN scheme was assessed through the One City One Site (OCOS) Pilot Project, which involved three communities across two Australian states. Each of the communities was assisted in setting up their CGDN portal by a designated facilitator. The OCOS Pilot Project was run by the NSW Office of Information and Communications Technology (OICT), and was overseen by the NRG (auDA, 2005c). The NRG's duties were completed in September 2004, at the official closure of the OCOS Pilot Project. The communities that were involved in this study were Bathurst and Wollongong, both in New South Wales, and Ballarat, in Victoria.

Bathurst is a medium-sized country town incorporating 30,000 residents (Wilkins, 2002). The size and regional location of the town appeared to have a significant advantage in allowing the community to share a single identity, and to develop strong community support for the project. The Bathurst community portal was facilitated by an OICT staff member located in the town. The Bathurst community portal established a representative membership base, with many enthusiastic participants. A portal containing original contact was developed.

Wollongong is a regional city with 200,000 residents (Wollongong City Council, 2004). The local university fa-

cilitated the project, which generated significant community interest. When formed, the management group was smaller than expected for a large city, however, all participants were extremely committed. The portal developed included a community directory and links to existing resources.

Ballarat is a large country site with a population of 85,000 (City of Ballarat, 2004). The Ballarat community portal was initiated and facilitated by an organization that was answerable to local council. This relationship with local council had a negative impact on community interest and commitment to the project, with many residents unwilling to become involved due to previous failed projects. The Ballarat group was guided by the existing entity, with few community members actively participating. At the completion of the OCOS project, Ballarat had not developed a portal.

Using observation, interviews and reports written by the community groups, the experiences of the OCOS Pilot Project communities were used to refine the CGDN application process. The facilitators of the three communities used their knowledge and experiences to develop a how-to kit for community groups attempting to apply for and develop a CGDN in the future, and to submit recommendations on CGDN policy to the NRG.

The three pilot communities were required to demonstrate that their management groups were representative of the local community, open to all locals who wished to join, and consisted of members who lived or worked in the designated region. This process will be similar for future communities, who will apply to a designated registrar to obtain a temporary hold on the licence prior to undertaking more comprehensive planning to complete the domain name application (DNA).

The pilot communities were required to complete an extensive DNA. Feedback from the facilitators and communities indicated that these reporting requirements were extremely time consuming. As a result, the DNA has been consolidated for the public release of the CGDNs. Essential sections of the DNA that were retained include proof of membership, publicity, support from local government, letters of support from various member of the local community, and significant organizational and financial planning. These factors were considered essential for the success of a community portal. While difficult to obtain letters of support from the communities so early in the process, this requirement forced communities to forge links with local community and businesses, with these contacts used to develop online links for the portal.

BENEFITS OF THE CGDN SCHEME

Communities developing a community portal under the CGDN scheme receive advantages through the scheme, but are required to abide by strict conditions. While indepen-

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