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ccTLDs and the Digital Divide

Given the well understood technical role undertaken by a ccTLD manager, should they have any role or responsibility either within their own territory or internationally to help bridge the digital divide?

Generally, inside their own territory, contributing to bridging the divide will require the ccTLD manager to closely co-operate with their government.

Internationally, closer co-operation between individual ccTLDs and between ccTLDs and governments may be necessary. Are there existing mechanisms in place to allow this to occur and if so do they operate in a way that ensures that what is currently being done is making a practical difference to those with very limited or no access to the Internet.

Personal Introduction – Roles at auDA / ccNSO

Proposition that ccTLDs, despite their specific technical role, can, should, and do, contribute significantly to

local and international efforts that help bridge the digital divide.

Context / history / background on ccTLDs:

- While there are currently a handful of generic TLDs such as .com and .net, there are 252 Country code top level domains active in the Domain Name System.
- During the establishment of the internet's naming and numbering overseeing structures, country codes were allocated and managed on a largely academic, volunteer basis.
- Over time, ccTLD management structures have evolved into a number of models – government-operated, not-for-profit, academic-based, for-profit.
- Irrespective of the structure, each of these ccTLDs shares a common attribute – they represent a distinct economy's identity on the internet and in many cases they do so on a purely not for profit basis for the benefit of the internet users in their territory..
- Their common role is to administer infrastructure and policy frameworks to ensure the stable and secure operation of the DNS for their specific country code. They are a trusted delegate with a

duty of responsibility to their local community and the global internet.

- While largely technical, this role has become critical given the importance of the internet in all aspects of modern life.

Domestic role of ccTLD manager:

- There is little argument regarding the economic, social and business opportunities that information technologies – particularly the internet - can deliver.
- As a result, throughout the world, the importance of the internet is being increasingly recognised in many aspects of government policy –
 - Development of broadband infrastructure,
 - distance education,
 - tele-medicine,
 - security initiatives,
 - telecommunications.
- By their very nature, many of these initiatives are designed to address domestic divides in digital opportunity – to facilitate more equitable access to faster connectivity, to education, health and communications.
- A secure, stable ccTLD underpins and can facilitate many of these initiatives, as the DNS provides the

human interface to the internet and is essential for almost every internet application.

- Given their experience within the given economy, the ccTLD manager is likely to be a primary source of technical expertise relating to Internet operations.
- They are largely apolitical, and capable of providing valuable contributions to government-driven initiatives and creating initiatives of their own.
- Australia is a vast country with a large number of rural communities. Maintaining the identity of these individual communities is crucial to maintaining the identity of Australia as a whole. Rural communities are in decline. Often the changing economics of society means that their original reason for existing is no longer there. Their young people move to the cities and the community slowly dies out. As a first step, improving the access that these rural communities have is essential and I think most of us would agree that government has primary responsibility for this. But putting the infrastructure in place is only the first step. Working to use that infrastructure to provide access to information and content that is RELEVANT TO and SUPPORTS the local community is the next step to bridging the divide. Because of this, the Australian ccTLD

manager introduced a special category of domain names called Community Geographic Domain Names. These names are the names of recognised communities and can only be registered by a local community based organisation that will use them for the benefit of their local community.

- Emergency Communication & Information
- During the Bushfire disasters in Victoria in January/February 2009, many of these CGDNs site provided local relevant emergency information on their websites which were much utilised and had a huge influence to the point that other communication can fail. . In these times of emergency disasters, the emergency services authorities, such as Country Fire Authorities, can be under way too much demand in terms of web traffic, as well as not providing easy access to relevant/local information.
- As an example, Mirboo North used their site www.mirboonorth.vic.au to ensure their community members were kept well informed with relevant emergency information As a result, they experienced 7 times their normal web traffic during the weekend of these fires and the local

council acknowledged their efforts and provided additional information to include on their site.

- Attracting new residents by providing employment section
- One of the major issues facing rural communities is the lack of medical professionals residents. Partners of the potential new resident health professionals also invariably need to know that they can also gain employment.
- The community of Mansfield in Victoria is one such community that lacked resident medical professionals and asked the Community website group to create an employment section on the website at www.mansfield.vic.au , particularly as they don't have a Job Network provider in their town. The employment section has since proved to be the most visited area on their community website
- Promoting local economy
- By providing online business and community directories, CGDN websites have enabled many organisations to have a web presence for the first time.

- Lowood in Queensland had very little information about what services were available in their town until they provided a directory on their website at www.lowood.qld.au which now provides details on every association, club, business, trade and service in Lowood and shows for the first time what an extraordinary set of local businesses they have as well as promoting their local economy to community members and potential visitors/residents.
- And I stress that all of this has been done at no cost whatsoever to government.
- So, I hope you can see that I believe that domestically, ccTLD managers can play a crucial role in bridging the digital divide, perhaps not at the pointy end of putting in the necessary infrastructure but certainly, once that infrastructure is in place, we can help to ensure that it can be used in a way that supports the best interests of the people.

International collaboration:

- For all of their domestic relevance, it is the international inter-relationship between ccTLD

managers (and their governments) that provides a collaborative model most capable of delivering a significant contribution to bridging the digital divide.

- ccTLDs can currently collaborate through the ccNSO – the policy development body created by, and for, ccTLD managers.
- As a supporting organisation of ICANN, the ccNSO is a worldwide forum for nurturing consensus, technical cooperation and skill building among ccTLDs and for facilitating the development of voluntary best practices for ccTLD managers.
- The ccNSO provides the opportunity for ccTLD managers from lesser-developed nations to exchange information and experience with counterparts from established country codes – under the broader umbrella of a multi-stakeholder organisation that also facilitates government, private-sector and civil society participation.
- By providing a forum for knowledge-exchange, the ccNSO is an immediate, tangible mechanism for bridging the digital divide.
- The most obvious, and here in Russia most relevant example of that is the introduction of IDN ccTLDs through the fast track process. I shall be talking in detail about the fast track in a session this afternoon but for now, in the context of bridging the digital divide I believe there is no

better example than the introduction of IDNs – that facilitate access for millions of internet users in non-Latin scripts – removing the language barrier for native users of, for example, Arabic, Cyrillic or Chinese

- The fast track process was an initiative of ccTLD managers. We recognised the urgent need and we created a unique consensus based bottom up process, working closely with governments in ICANN's Governmental Advisory Committee, that within a relatively short time frame has led us to where we are today with Russia becoming one of the first countries in the world to be able to provide access to the internet to their people in a way that those people can understand. In my view there is nothing that has happened in the last 10 years of internet development that has done so much to bridge the digital divide. And it was created by and driven by ccTLDs in cooperation with governments but using a non-government process.

Summary

- ccTLDs can, and do, contribute to bridging of the digital divide.
- Locally, they are key stakeholders in managing key internet infrastructure that underpins many key social and economic initiatives

- Collaboratively, they exchange information and develop policies that contribute to narrowing the gap between digital “haves” and “have nots”
- The mechanisms through which they do this – open, bottom-up, consensus-based, multi-stakeholder – are effective and are an appropriate model of governance for a resource that was established and grew in a spirit of collaboration and cooperation.
- Finally, I’d like to echo the comments of Mr Strickling about the continuation of IGF. As a member of the UN Sec Gen MAG on the IGF I am very concerned that we send a clear message to the governments in the UN considering the future of IGF that for it to remain truly multi-stakeholder it must not just be an annual forum open to all stakeholders but must remain an annual forum that is ORGANISED by all stakeholders.