

**Getting Online for a Good Yarn:
Achieving E-Governance Strength Through the Active
Participation of Citizens**

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Abstract

This paper explores the value electronic governance initiatives which take the form of an online community. Theory relevant to community informatics and online communities is reviewed. The case study for the Young Australian Rural Network (YARN) is then presented to draw out some of the benefits, challenges and learning that can be experienced in operationalising online initiatives. YARN (www.yarn.gov.au) is an initiative of the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry – Australia (AFFA). It is an interactive online community for young people working in rural industries. It provides a ‘vehicle’ for young people to communicate directly with AFFA and to keep in touch with each other, collaborate, share ideas and strengthen networks. The establishment of YARN was supported by research undertaken during 2001 which confirmed that the Internet represented a powerful communication channel for reaching young people. In June 2002 AFFA recruited a person with the primary responsibility of overseeing the establishment and ongoing development of an online community where ‘ownership’ would be shared between AFFA and young people in rural industries. AFFA clearly understood that functionality could be created but that an online community would not exist unless its members were actively involved and interacting with each other. Through YARN the Federal Government has established a practical mechanism for achieving many of the promises of electronic governance.

Keywords

Online community, community informatics, Young Australian Rural Network, ICT evaluation, regional development.

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Introduction

This paper explores the value electronic governance initiatives which take the form of an online community. Theory relevant to community informatics and online communities is reviewed. The case study for the Young Australian Rural Network (YARN) is then presented to draw out some of the benefits, challenges and learning that can be experienced in operationalising online initiatives. Through YARN the Federal Government has established a practical mechanism for achieving many of the promises of electronic governance. There appears to be significant potential for replicating similar research, infrastructure and processes to establish effective and sustainable online services in other electronic governance contexts.

Community informatics and online communities

Community informatics (CI) is an overarching term and an emerging field of study that focuses on the use of information and communications technologies by communities for their betterment. CI links the concepts of social, economic, political and cultural development with emerging opportunities from ICTs (Gurstein 2000). Loader (2002, p. 1) identifies that interest in community informatics 'has been greatly accelerated as a consequence of the greater diffusion of the Internet and its revolutionary potential for influencing all areas of social life'. He observes that throughout the world, social experiments in community informatics and community networking have flourished on a wave of euphoria for the transforming capacity of ICTs. However:

As these voluntary, commercial and state sponsored initiatives have begun to provide us with experiences and lessons voiced by those involved...it is perhaps time to undertake a more cautious and reflexive view of the role of ICTs in community development (Loader 2002, p. 1).

Historically, the emergence of CI is often traced to a community oriented Bulletin Board System in Berkeley, California in 1979. Bulletin boards made it possible for people to send messages almost in real time or store information for later retrieval by others. Usage of this type proliferated in the USA throughout the 1980s, ostensibly to promote participatory democracy and disseminate information with considerable migration to Internet based systems by the early 1990s (Day 2001).

By 1997, Hagel and Armstrong were promoting the benefits of interaction between people visiting a website in an attempt to build a feeling of connectedness (Day 2001). With the opening of the Internet to the general public there has been a greater movement towards the use of ICT as a tool for community development (Tharp 2002). During 1999, Gurstein proposed a number of strategies for making ICT an enabler of community development. These included using ICT as a marketing tool for small business; the use of ICT as an enabler for mobilising a range of resources for community economic development; and the use of ICT to create a distributed network for the emergence of new networks and economies of disaggregation (cited in Benjamin 2001).

CI objectives are increasingly linked to improving the communities in which the initiatives are targeted to serve (both geographical and interest related). In this context online communities are seen as 'more than just virtual communities in cyberspace, they are about the development of "real" communities by the people of those communities' (Day 2001, p.40).

In terms of CI success, Day (2001) identifies the retention of a sense of community ownership as a key factor in achieving initiative sustainability.

While this often presents difficulty in government led initiatives, it can be achieved by ensuring that participatory processes continue throughout a project lifecycle, that is, through the implementation and ongoing development phases. 'This is crucial if an initiative is to meet changing community circumstances and needs' (Day 2001, p. 45). For community informatics projects to be empowering they must also be socially conceptualised. Loader identifies this as 'bottom up' or grassroots approach (Loader 2002 p. 5). Like Day, he identifies the importance of involving community members if they are to 'own' and drive an initiative for themselves.

Colle (2000, pp. 4-13) has identified ten themes that underpin the success of CI initiatives in the form of telecentres. These themes appear to have broader relevance for CI generally:

1. The power of a national commitment by policy-makers who recognise the value of connecting the people of the country through the modern tools of the information society, and follow that commitment with funding and organisational support for multi-year programs.
2. The importance of partnerships in translating national policy into action through governmental and non-governmental bodies at the regional and local levels.
3. The value of having local 'champions' (innovators) who can mobilise others (early adopters, opinion leaders).
4. The significant value of community volunteers.
5. The advantages of clusters or networks working together in a region to develop and share a variety of resources.
6. The importance of popularising the belief that information and ICTs can be a valuable resource for individuals, families, organisations and communities.
7. The role of research in creating viable enterprises.
8. The need for long-term sustainability and business plans that fit the culture of the community.
9. Focusing on information service rather than on computers and the internet alone.
10. Participation as an important goal that requires a strategic approach.

With no specific strategy for measuring the effects or outcomes of CI and ICT programs in regional Australia, Spencer (2002, p. 351) asks how then, 'do we determine whether these activities are having an effect, and whether it is the desired effect?' Effective evaluation is becoming increasingly important:

As the area of regional development through ICT loses its newness, and ICT programs require more effective business case analysis, understanding of success factors, and realistic expectations, we can expect that evaluations will become even more important. If the current 'bandwagon' mode of decision making slows down, the relevant advantage of ICT developments will have to be demonstrated – not just evangelised (Spencer 2002, p. 359).

Tharp (2002) identifies that little research has been undertaken which considers the interconnectedness between online and offline communities. Benefits would be secured from addressing the current lack of research as:

Online communities can serve as a catalyst for expanding networks within existing geographic communities. This is important not only for increasing the demand for local products and services within the emerging information age, but also from a health perspective. Social cohesion and interconnectedness have demonstrable impacts on social, economic, and health outcomes in communities (Tharp 2002, p. 196).

Denison *et al.* (2002) also call for better use of recognised evaluation methodologies as this will lead to improved understanding and outcomes in the CI field. In an attempt to generate debate and discussion and to alleviate some confusion they constructed a community networking taxonomy to communicate the major characteristics and community utilisations of ICT in Australia. Five major categories of organisations are described: individual organisations; clusters of like organisations; cross-sectoral collections of geographically based entities; civic networks; and service and application provider organisations. While these categories are not mutually exclusive the

authors believe they provide a relatively good fit to the observed reality of the Australian ICT scene (Denison *et al.* 2002). These organisational categories are then mapped against factors drawn from a review of community informatics evaluations in a number of counties. These dimensions include: enhancing strong democracy; increasing social capital; empowering individuals; revitalising a sense of community; and providing economic development opportunities (Denison *et al.* 2002, pp. 6-7). The matrix reproduced in Table 1 below serves to summarise the aspirations for ICT engagement of the identified groups.

Table 1. Explicit aspirations for ICT engagement

	<i>Individual organisations</i>	<i>Cluster of like organisations intra-sectional</i>	<i>Collectives of neighbourhood stakeholders cross-sectoral</i>	<i>Civic networks - government agency led</i>	<i>Service and application provider organisations</i>
Enhancing strong democracy	Generally LOW	Generally LOW	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH
Increasing social capital	Generally LOW	Generally LOW	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH
Empowering individuals	Medium to HIGH	Medium to HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH
Revitalising sense of community	Generally LOW	Generally LOW	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH
Providing economic development opportunities	Generally LOW	Generally LOW	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH

Source: Denison *et al.* (2002, p. 7).

Governments at all levels have demonstrated substantial interest in developing online capabilities that build stronger and more viable communities in terms of promoting community empowerment, economic and business development and equity of service. In the following section a case study is presented for the Young Australian Rural Network (YARN) www.yarn.gov.au. This is an initiative of the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry – Australia (AFFA).

Young Australian Rural Network

YARN is an interactive online community, 'a vehicle' for young people working in rural industries to communicate directly with AFFA and with each other and to keep in touch, collaborate, share ideas and strengthen networks.

The establishment of YARN was supported by research undertaken during 2001 which sought to better inform AFFA about young people 18-35 years who represented one-third of all people working in rural industries. The research outcomes were subsequently communicated through a publication titled *Guidelines for Reaching our Clients – Young People*, which was launched in May 2002 (Department of Agriculture Fisheries & Forestry Australia 2002). In introducing the guide, Michael Taylor, the Department Secretary, highlighted the importance of including young people in AFFAs decision-making.

Our research tells us that this significant group is impatient with prevailing timeframes for government and industry policy development; is not enthusiastic about agro-political structures and decision-making; communicates differently; is more likely to be positive about the future of agriculture and their own future than their older peers; and, importantly, wants to roll up its collective sleeves and get the job done...This client group must be effectively engaged in our work because not only have they inherited our current agriculture, fisheries and forestry environments and the well-being of rural communities, they determine the immediate future of rural and regional Australia (Department of Agriculture Fisheries & Forestry Australia 2002, p. 2).

The research conducted for AFFA confirmed that the Internet represented a powerful communication channel for reaching young people. Of the 350 young people surveyed, 67 percent had access to the Internet with 50 percent

using it at least weekly. Email was the preferred medium for communicating but websites were identified as a more useful way of accessing information, 'particularly for keeping up with industry information' (Department of Agriculture Fisheries & Forestry Australia 2002, p. 9). In terms of designing Internet communications, the need for interactivity was confirmed. There was also the continuing requirement to be mindful of slow download times in some areas. Respondents pointed out that extensive use of links to other relevant sites on the Internet would be most likely to draw them back to a site, but that out-of-date websites were unlikely to get a second chance (*Department of Agriculture Fisheries & Forestry Australia 2002, p. 15*).

During June 2002 AFFA recruited a person who would have the primary responsibility of researching and overseeing the establishment and ongoing development of an online community where 'ownership' would be shared between AFFA and young people in rural industries. The project objectives for the Young Australian Rural Network project (YARN) would include:

1. Promoting and supporting further networking amongst graduates of the various Young People in Rural Industries programs coordinated by AFFA.
2. Providing a two-way communication tool as a conduit for information flow between AFFA and its stakeholders, with communication ideally being equally initiated at both ends.
3. Serving as an information 'hub' for young people in rural industries to find further information on non-government organisations, networks and groups, particularly by providing a facility for non-government youth networks to post information about their organisation on the site.
4. Serving also as a general dissemination tool for the Young People in Rural Industries program (YPIRI program), in conjunction with the existing AFFA website (www.affa.gov.au).

While the intention was for AFFA to establish and maintain the site, graduates from various elements of the YPIRI program would determine the content, and as far as possible, the structure and facilities. AFFA clearly understood that

functionality could be created (discussion forums, event calendars, web page building facilities, member listings etc.) but that an online community would not exist unless its members were actively involved and interacting with each other. A key objective was therefore to actively engage graduates of the YPIRI program in the initial and ongoing development of YARN.

Research indicated that one of the greatest barriers to young people's input in industry decision-making was their perception that industry organisations and government move too slowly and outcomes take too long. They prefer working to shorter times and appreciate quick results...Young people want a stronger sense of developmental milestones, how their contribution is valued and how their involvement can make a difference. They require feedback in order to maintain their interest and motivation (Department of Agriculture Fisheries & Forestry Australia 2002, p. 15).

The University of Ballarat through its Centre for Electronic Commerce and Communications (CECC) was invited to submit a proposal for the development of YARN during June 2002 after AFFA identified the University's involvement in projects including Ararat Online www.ararat.asn.au, the MainStreet Regional Portal project www.mainstreet.net.au and Moorabool Online www.mconline.com.au. CECC was subsequently engaged to develop the web-based infrastructure for the online community which was likely to include six key elements as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Proposed functionality for YARN

Functionality	Description
Discussion Forum	Have your say, share info, ask questions, or just find out what people are talking about.
Event Calendar	Check out what events are available nationwide, promote your events and get free publicity on YARN.

News Page	Where you can submit news that you would like young people to know about.
People Listing	Look up who has been involved in AFFA's YPIRI program, and get in contact with them.
Have Your Say	Have your say on draft Government policy - by responding to draft policy posted on the site, or post information for consultation and feedback by young people.
Free Web Page	Promote non-government organisations for young people in agriculture, fisheries, forestry, food and natural resource management.

Approximately one hundred YPIRI graduates were contacted via email on 7 July 2002 and asked to contribute to an online survey that would gather their opinions on the features of an online community that they would find most useful. The results would inform the development of YARN, confirm whether AFFA's vision was appropriate and also test the level of responsiveness and interest which was generated. Three music gift vouchers prizes were offered as an incentive to encourage participation. One email reminder was sent during the two-week information collection period. Results were then collated, prize winners were announced and detailed feedback provided to all graduates on 25 July 2002. Table 3 summarises graduate responses to the major functional elements of the proposed site.

Table 3. Website survey results for YARN

Type of Functionality	Very Useful %	Somewhat Useful %	Neutral, opinion unsure %	no or particularly useful %
Events calendar	81	14	5	0
Member listing	69	31	0	0
Discussion forum	63	27	5	4
Document library	54	28	13	5
Site builder	46	36	9	9

Source: www.affa.gov.au/content/ind_dev/youthsurvey.cfm

The strategies of 'engage early' and 'communicate innovatively' were embraced by AFFA in implementing the YARN project (Department of Agriculture Fisheries & Forestry Australia 2002, p.16) with graduate responses consistent with the observations made through prior research:

Young women and men are more inclined to get involved if they can play a role in the direction setting/planning stage, rather than if they are simply involved to participate at the consultative stage. That is, they want to be part of driving direction rather than reacting to it (Department of Agriculture Fisheries & Forestry Australia 2002, p. 16).

When the survey results were disseminated, graduates were thanked for their participation and advised that AFFA would contact them during the next week to seek contributions for content for the site. Graduates were assured that submitting content would not be a complex process. Publishing information on the events calendar, news section, or providing information about their rural networks or organisations would be no more difficult than the online survey they had just participated in. Regular communication with graduates continued throughout the very short development period for the YARN project. Graduates were, for example, provided with access to the development site and asked for feedback on its design, navigation and functionality. They each received individual user names and passwords and were given instructions on how to access the graduates area of the website and how to begin submitting content in the lead-up to the official launch of YARN on the 27 August 2002 (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1: YARN – August 2002



Initial publicity associated with the launch of YARN included the issuing a press release, direct email notification to key people such as the presidents and convenors of organisations for young people, and a front-page link and news story on the Federal Government entry point at www.fed.gov.au. The Federal Minister encouraged young people to 'Get online and get involved. Take pride in your views, ideas and achievements. Watch the awareness grow amongst government and industry of your valuable contributions, and watch YARN grow with it' (Truss 2002, p. 1).

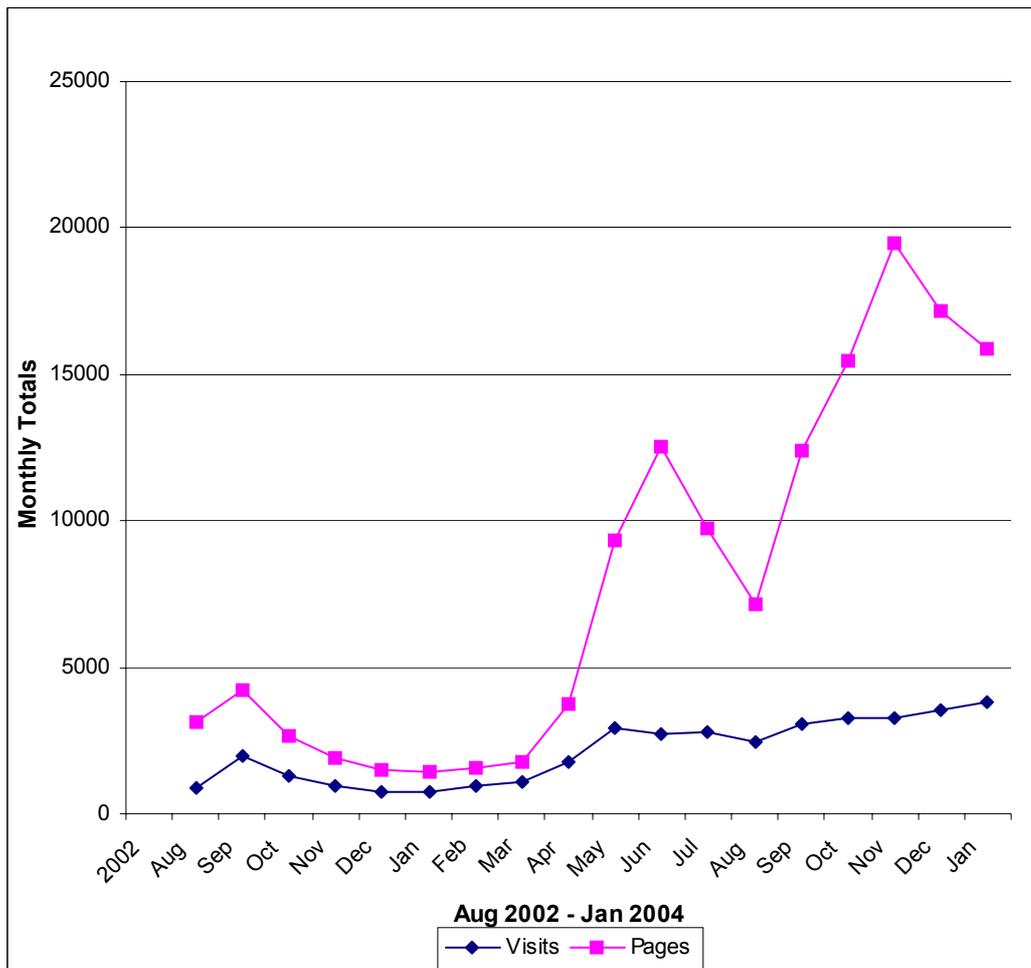
Longer-term promotion has been achieved through the fortnightly e-newsletter of the Rural Industries Leadership Section of AFFA and by providing all new graduates of the YPIRI program with publishing access on YARN. Organisations who use the 'site builder' tool also promote YARN through their web address (see, for example, the Bush Capital Club www.yarn.gov.au/sites/BCC).

The public and member services accessible through YARN have progressively expanded in the period since the initial launch of the site. One example involved the development and launch of GATEway, an opportunities reference database, which has been incorporated into the existing site. This reference tool provides young people with a centrally housed information database of relevant government and non-government programs, awards, events and training opportunities. The initial database content was contributed by members of the Young People in Rural Industries Working Group, but since the GATEway application has gone 'live' other agencies and organisations have been invited to publish information. While the application design is very functional, it is simple to enter information. Users are able to interrogate the database in a number of ways, for example, by using key terms or by entering one or more qualifiers to narrow their search as required. Selections can then be collated and printed in PDF quality format. A second example is the expansion of the member area to include an online forum to support ongoing contact between graduates of the YPIRI program.

Site development opportunities and enhancements continue to be identified in response to graduate and visitor feedback, site statistics and other available information. This ongoing process better ensures that YARN can continue to meet the information and communication needs of AFFA and young people in rural industries.

YARN visitors are also provided with multiple opportunities for active involvement, for example, by starting or contributing to an online discussion, building a site, adding a link, publishing events or suggesting new items.

Figure 2: Usage statistics August 2002 – January 2004



In the 18 months since its launch YARN has received over 420,000 hits, received 38,350 unique visits and provided site visitors with 141,064 page views (refer Figure 2). The initial peak for site visits occurred within one month of the launch of YARN. A steady increase in site visitation can be confirmed over the last twelve months with the level of utilisation increasing from 765 visits in January 2003 to 3802 visits in January 2004. Apart from the entrance to the site, the discussion forum consistently receives the highest number of visits. Other popular areas include the graduate area, calendar, links news and administration areas of the site. Site utilisation as measured by page views has also increased substantially over the period.

Conclusions

A number of important themes can be drawn from the YARN case:

1. Online initiatives have been pursued as part of a clearly articulated strategy with strong links, for example, to traditional marketing methods and established networks.
2. Initiatives have been developed to support various sectors of the target community, for example, graduate services (YPIRI participants), site builder (non-government organisations), GATEway (organisations offering learning and funding opportunities for young people), communication tools (young people) which can be accessed to promote events, generate discussion, share resources and disseminate news.
3. The continued focus on empowering individuals through the provision of appropriate online services (including ongoing support services) based on demonstrated needs.
4. Strong leadership (AFFA), dedicated project officer (minimum of 2 years) and ongoing exploration of related but discrete initiatives that can be seamlessly integrated to enhance initial activities.
5. Effective demonstration of the potential for Government as a facilitator rather than the 'owner' and 'driver' of online initiatives.

Returning to the Denison (2002) aspirations for government led ICT engagement activities it is now possible to better evaluate how YARN is providing an appropriate environment for enhancing democracy, increasing social capital, empowering individuals, revitalising a sense of community and providing economic development opportunities. Through YARN the Federal Government has established a practical mechanism for achieving many of the promises of electronic governance. There appears to be significant potential for similar initiatives in other electronic governance context.

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