Computers aren't just **grey** anymore

Extract from a speech to the Australian Computer Conference for seniors by Johanna Plante, part time member, Australian Communications and Media Authority

We are going grey, but computers are getting younger in terms of capacity, strength, speed and looks. A huge selling point for computers now is colour and design—from hot pink to pitch black, lime green to leather. Change is a constant in all our lives ... and telecommunications and its inextricable link with computers is arguably the most rapidly and massively changing aspect of our lives.

With qualifications in engineering and decades of telecommunications experience, people assume (incorrectly) that I'm a computer and internet whiz. But when I moved from being Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Communications Industry Forum in Sydney to semi-retirement in Port Parham, a small seaside community about 80 kilometres north of Adelaide, I moved from an environment of having staff to provide computing support to one where there was just the computer and me—all alone, facing each other, ready for combat. And combat it was ...

But I'm improving and gaining confidence slowly, one step at a time, driven by necessity—the need to keep in touch, to organise things, to send and receive documents and information, to be able to participate in today's internet-based way of life. We now have broadband at home, I've successfully used internet cafés overseas and will hopefully soon be trialing a real-time text-over-internet protocol gateway service.

While we're all trying to get on board and join in the internet revolution, the pace of change in communications does seem to be creating a gap between generations. For most of us, a fixed-line home telephone service was a given, but ACMA's figures for 30 June 2006 show that fixed-line residential connections have decreased by three per cent to 11.3 million since 2003, while mobile phones have increased by 20 per cent to 19.8 million and broadband internet connections have increased by a massive 267 per cent.

The generation driving this move away from fixed line services to wireless and internet-protocol services is Gen Y—16 to 30 year olds—a 'digital natives' generation used to accessing information, sourcing entertainment and socialising through the internet, mobiles, MP3s and shared websites with user-generated content and contact points such as YouTube and MySpace. Portability and instant access are the name of the game. Almost 90 per cent of Gen Y members own or have access to a computer, while more than 98 per cent own a mobile and regularly use the internet.

So change is happening. It's continuing. It's accelerating. It's inevitable. But it's also often challenging, sometimes confronting—even, at times, exhilarating. No matter what age we are, we all need to adapt to change where we can, accept it and embrace its positive aspects. And the way to do that is to be informed. And that's a clear role for ACMA—to provide the tools to help consumers of all ages make informed decisions, and to encourage consumer participation in the communications revolution.

ACMA's regulatory responsibilities

As Australia's converged multimedia regulator, ACMA has industry regulation and consumer protection responsibilities in relation to broadcasting, radiocommunications, telecommunications and the internet. Our consumer protection roles are to administer and, where necessary, enforce the protections provided in legislation, regulations and industry codes, and to identify when and where more protections might be needed and how to achieve this.

Internet regulation

Our responsibilities in regulating the internet include:
- investigating complaints about internet content
- encouraging the development of codes of practice and other self-regulatory arrangements for mobile services and the internet, and registering and monitoring compliance with these codes

- providing advice, information and education to the community about internet and chat room safety
- liaising with federal and state police child protection units, schools and state education departments, and
- undertaking support activities including research and international liaison.

NetAlert

An important element of ACMA's education role is providing advice to the public about the types of content and behaviour they might find on the internet. Awareness and education are essential when managing the potential risks.

The NetAlert – Protecting Australian Families Online initiative was launched recently by the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Senator Helen Coonan.

The NetAlert Outreach and Research program, managed by ACMA, provides information about current trends in internet safety. We also run targeted awareness-raising campaigns and activities, including the Cybersafe and Cybersmart kids programs, developed in response to growing concern about mobile and internet chat rooms. The Cybersmartkids' website provides advice and information about supervising children's internet access, email, spam, chat rooms, instant messaging and blogs, the use of software filters, labels and safe zones, and how to lodge a complaint about offensive material.

SpamMATTERS

ACMA has developed SpamMATTERS, a button you can download to your web browser and click on to report spam to ACMA (and delete it at the same time), capturing spam that bypasses anti-spam filters. Since it was launched in May 2006, more than 25 million spam emails have been reported. SpamMATTERS data is used to investigate Australian spamming activity, with criminal spam referred to the Australian High Tech Crime Centre. Websites can be shut down and reports generated to help target spam originating from overseas.

Internet content regulation

Our complaints hotline, www.acma.gov.au/hotline, allows the public to report offensive internet material or content that may be prohibited. Content is assessed in accordance with the National Classification Scheme and is prohibited if it's likely to fall within the classifications RC, which means refused classification, or X 18+.

ACMA can investigate stored internet content on the World Wide Web, in postings on newsgroups and bulletin boards and files accessible using peer-to-peer software. If the content is prohibited and hosted in Australia, we direct the content host to remove the content from the internet. If the prohibited content is hosted outside Australia, we notify suppliers of approved filters, which are updated regularly to block prohibited content. If the content is sufficiently serious—for example, illegal material such as child pornography—we refer it to the appropriate law enforcement agency for criminal investigation.

Compliance and enforcement

But effective consumer protection in all these areas clearly requires widespread industry compliance with all regulatory and self-regulatory obligations. One of our most important challenges is to meet the public's expectation that we effectively and efficiently enforce industry's compliance with its obligations—legislative, regulatory and co-regulatory.

We have enforcement options that allow us to deal with various compliance scenarios, from the unintentional breach to systemic abuses. If a breach has occurred, we will, within the limits of our power, take regulatory action commensurate with the seriousness of that breach.

Universal service obligation review looks at how the load is shared

An issues paper was released recently as part of a review of the telecommunications universal service obligation (USO) by the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Senator Helen Coonan.

The USO Review is examining the architecture of the universal service regime and the most effective way to deliver universal services to consumers. It will take account of changes in technology and in the Australian telecommunications marketplace and will consider whether the load is being shared equitably by industry. The review has a broad focus and seeks innovative ideas and approaches for the delivery of USO services.

The USO is a key safeguard for consumers ensuring that all Australians, including people in rural and remote Australia, have access to essential telephone services and payphones. The review provides an opportunity for consumers to have a say on the effectiveness of the USO arrangements and gives telecommunications providers the opportunity to provide input on how the requirements of meeting the USO can be shared equitably.

The USO review will consider whether it is appropriate for Telstra to be the USO provider in all circumstances. For example, should Telstra be required to be the universal service provider in a greenfield estate where another company wins the development contract to be the infrastructure provider for that estate? Or should the company that wins that contract also bear the responsibility for the provision of a telephone service in that new estate?

The universal service regime is funded by an industry levy.

The 2004 *Review of the Operation of the Universal Service Obligation and Customer Service Guarantee* found that, at the time, the universal service regime was broadly meeting its legislative objectives. However, changes in the telecommunications market since that time have raised new challenges for the USO regulatory framework.

The USO relates to the provision of basic telephone services and payphones. These services have generally been provided by fixed copper infrastructure, but can now be delivered through other means, such as using voice over internet protocol, and mobile and broadband networks. The review will consider the provision of voice and payphone services under the universal service regime. It will also consider the most effective and cost-efficient way to deliver these services to consumers.

Submissions should be sent to the USO Review, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, by email to uso@dcita.gov.au, by mail to GPO Box 2154, Canberra ACT 2601 or by fax to 02 6271 1850. The closing date for submissions is 1 November 2007. The issues paper is on the department's website at www.dcita.gov.au/uso.

We encourage consumers to make submissions commenting on legislative, regulatory and self-regulatory initiatives and changes. We also need to gather information from consumers by fostering close relationships with user and consumer organisations such as the ASCCA and listening to what you have to say, and more formally through mechanisms such as our Consumer Consultative Forum.

Access to communications

The accessibility of standard telecommunications services has long been a basic tenet of Australia's telecommunications regime. Provisions such as the universal service obligation, the Customer Service Guarantee, the National Relay Service, the standard telephone service, interconnection, pensioner subsidies and price caps are about making sure all Australian telephone subscribers—including people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment—can communicate on an equivalent basis with all other subscribers, irrespective of where they live or, to a lesser extent, their financial circumstances.

With the developments in computer and communications technologies, new opportunities are emerging for improving communications for all Australians—including those with disabilities and the rapidly growing seniors sector. However, the proliferation of these technologies also has the potential to exclude certain sectors—the same technological advances that have brought immense benefits to our society and economy can present significant barriers to the people who could benefit most from these services.

An emerging example is voice over internet protocol—VoIP. At present, people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment can use telephone typewriters (TTYs) to have real-time interactive text conversations over the public telephone network—either directly with each other or with voice telephone users through the National Relay Service. However, such conversational, character-by-character text telephony is not currently available on VoIP services, and services such as email and instant messaging are not real-time, nor do they offer truly interactive conversation.

Around the world, different approaches to access and participation are being explored. Captel is an integrated voice and text telephone service—a captioned telephone—that looks targeted to users who prefer to speak their side of the conversation, but would benefit from receiving both speech and text in response.

The full text of Ms Plante's speech is on the ACMA website at www.acma.gov.au (go to Home > About ACMA: News & media centre > Speeches).