



NBN could be a game changer in digital economy

ANTHONY WONG
 ACS



WHEN Benjamin Franklin first harnessed electricity back in 1752, he could not have foreseen how radically he would change our way of life. Later contributions by Nikola Tesla and others formed the basis of modern alternating current electric power systems, which helped usher in the second industrial revolution. Their work paved the way for subsequent “game changers” such as lighting, heating, communication and more recently computing.

According to the UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development: “In the same way that the construction of electricity grids and transport links spurred innovation far beyond the dreams of their builders, high-speed broadband networks are a platform for progress.”

The potential of the digital economy is undeniable. We believe that only a fraction of its possibility has been realised as most of the applications that will leverage the power of the digital economy are yet to be created.

With the building of the National Broadband Network, government and industry are actively working with various sectors such as retailers to drive their online strategy, including running seminars explaining how to maximise online sales, market to overseas customers and transact business while they sleep. We believe the government needs to do more to educate the community about the benefits of the NBN by modelling, profiling and exemplifying the significant productivity gains NBN applications will provide.

Technology is the underlying contributor to productivity growth. The 2011 Telstra Productivity Index found Australia's productivity leaders were more likely to have invested in multi-

media, online processing procedures and improved network speeds in the past 12 months or planned to do so this year.

Science has been another major beneficiary of the growing digital economy. In addition to driving economic productivity, it fosters inclusion, addressing the digital divide and building community by mobilising thousands of volunteers to contribute to the measurement and testing of changing environmental and migratory patterns.

One of the best known citizen science programs in Australia is the Australian Bureau of Meteorology's national network of more than 6000 volunteer weather watchers. Strategically located around the nation, these residents record information on rainfall levels, developing storms, river height and sea conditions for the bureau's weather databases.

Other projects involving Australian citizens to gather and disseminate information include ClimateWatch, Frogwatch, Toadbusters, WaterWatch, Operation Spider, Seagrass Watch, Coastcare, Greening Australia, Conservation Volunteers, Shorebird 2010 and the Threatened Bird Network.

One of the latest community projects leveraging the internet is the Atlas of Living Australia, an online repository which gives researchers, students and the wider community access to an extraordinary array of information about Australia's animals, plants and micro-organisms.

Described as a biodiversity “yellow pages”, the website has information on nearly 600,000 different species along with their common names, photographs, identification keys, mapping tools, background information and

scientific notes, links to other information repositories and more.

The result of a five-year partnership between the CSIRO, Australian government and Australian museums, herbariums and other biological collections, the Atlas also provides a range of in tools to assist students and teachers with science projects.

A highly collaborative project, the Atlas welcomes input from amateur scientists and students, allowing them to add photos and information about local sightings of animals and plants to the website database to help build a clearer picture of Australia's diverse environment.

New and innovative ways to exploit the full potential of the digital economy will be the focus of the 2011 Korea-Australia-New Zealand (KANZ) Broadband Summit to be held in Hobart on April 28 and 29.

Tasmania's role in piloting Australia's NBN makes it the ideal venue for this collaboration between industry, research and government representatives from all three nations. Topics to be explored include convergence, digital business, digital education, telehealth, broadband policy and digital heritages.

Just as Franklin harnessed the power of lightning, we must take full advantage of the digital economy. As the NBN rollout continues, Australia's ability to develop new and original solutions that leverage the increased broadband capacity will be critical to our future growth and prosperity.

Anthony Wong is president of the ACS and chief executive of AGW Consulting, a multidisciplinary ICT, intellectual property legal and consulting practice