



Digital Preparedness in the Era of Online Social Services: an Australian case study

Dr. Siobhan O'Sullivan, UNSW, @so_s

Dr. Chris Walker, UNSW

ICCP 2017, Singapore

Thursday, June 29th 13:30 to 15:30 (Manasseh Meyer MM 3 - 2)

Contact: siobhan.osullivan@unsw.edu.au

Early stages...

This is the start of our research process. Today we can only present our early findings and our research agenda.

We would love to be able to present our solid findings today, but sadly it is not possible. Hopefully at the next conference!

So far our research has been funded by a small grant from the School of Social Sciences, UNSW.

The next phase is to secure larger-scale funding (which we are working on now).

Starting propositions

There is a move – at least in Europe – for social services to be increasingly delivered via digital means. For example:

- In the Netherlands, the first year of employment services are non face-to-face services.
- In the UK, the first 2 years of employment services will consist of 7 minutes per-fortnight with JCP, and online services.

In Australia, employment services are delivered by private companies. They are always seeking efficiencies. We therefore started by asking:

1. To what extent is there a push towards social service digitalization by private companies?
2. Given the vastness of Australia, and the fact that we have some of the slowest/worst Internet and phone connections in the world, will Australian infrastructure cope with service digitalization?
3. Given the above, what will digitalization mean for already disadvantaged welfare recipients?

We quickly discovered that many of our assumptions were incorrect!

e-government in Australia

e-government is now very big business in Australia, with the state of New South Wales (NSW) and the Federal Government leading the charge.

- Almost half of NSW Government transactions are undertaken digitally.
- The NSW Government has set a 70 per cent target for 2019.
- The Federal Government has established the 'Digital Transformation Agency'.
- All government departments are expected to follow the Agency's lead, and work on digital platforms. The agency has strong buy in and support from the Prime Minister. An element of his national innovation agenda.
- In addition to the actual technical practice of digitalisation, the Agency has the power to examine all laws that might act as a block to digitalisation and make 'changes to existing policy and legislation'.
- The rhetoric from government is that this is about efficiency, but also about enhanced, customer focused services, 'using agile methods to deliver and continuously improve services for users'
- An interview we conducted with the Federal Department of Employment confirmed the importance of working with the Agency, and the increased emphasis on the customer: *'the jobseeker side of the world is becoming far more, well not more, but certainly a lot more important in the grand scheme of things'*.

e-government in Australia

That is not to suggest that the transition is not ongoing and challenging.

- Global research by Deloitte (2015) reports that 96% of government officials surveyed consider digitalisation to be disruptive and that the level of disruption is significant.
- The same research also suggests that in Australia, only 27% of Australian public sector agencies felt confident in their agency's digital preparedness and 80% of those surveyed consider the Australian public sector to be lagging behind the private sector.
- Australia has also experienced significant digital-related scandal, such as the Centrelink 'robo-debt' issue and the #censusfail event.

But, in relation to e-government, 2015 data is now quite old.

It is clear from our research that digital government services have started arriving and will accelerate quickly from here.

Challenging our assumptions

1. To what extent is there a push towards social service digitalization by private companies?

Our opening assumption is misplaced. The digital push appears to be on the part of the purchaser, not the providers.

An interviewee representing the providers:

‘No, I’m not actually aware of any providers who are definitely looking for that kind of thing [the ability to digitalise their service model]’.

‘I think they are not going to be the early adopters [smaller providers and NGOs]’.

‘[The financial bottom line is] their prime concern [influencing] any kind of change or any kind of modification to the way they operate’.

An interviewee representing the purchaser:

‘A common job seeker would only meet with their provider once every two weeks...our vision here is that they would have access to all the information about employment services, and the programs that are available, they’d have real time information about jobs...they can do it all online, and they can do it at three o’clock in the morning if they want to’.

‘For the most part I don’t see, I haven’t observed many providers sort of doing anything amazing or different in the digital space’.

Challenging our assumptions

2. **Given the vastness of Australia, and the fact that we have some of the slowest/worst Internet and phone connections in the world, will Australian infrastructure cope with service digitalization?**

This is a significant issue.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that:

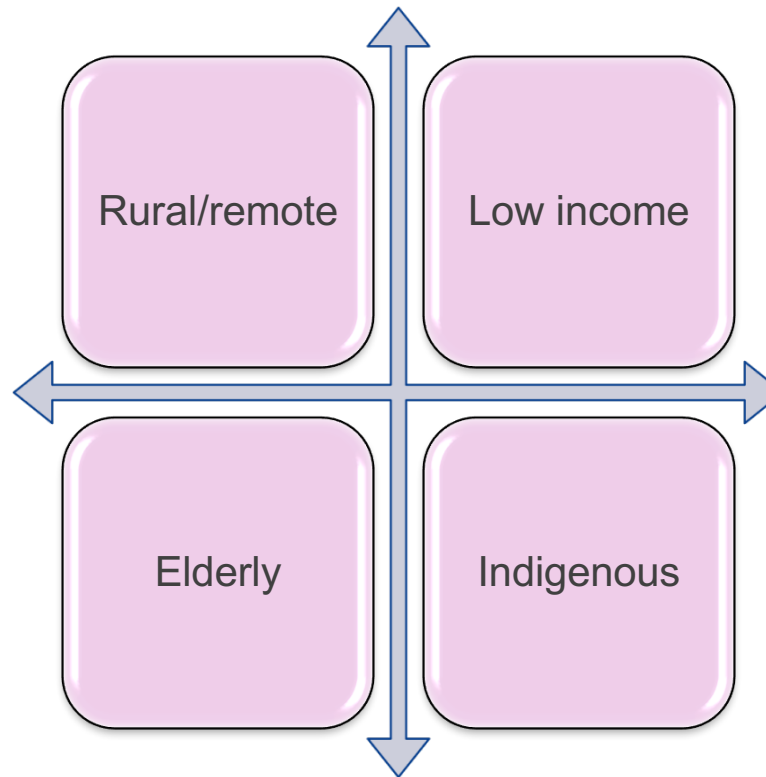
- In major cities, 88% of households have access to the internet.
- It is 79% in more remote parts of Australia.
- Fibre is the fastest way to receive the internet. But as of June 2016, less than 100,000 households had access.

But, what our research so far has shown is that it is not just infrastructure that is inadequate in Australia. A lack of data security, and vulnerability to cyber attacks are significant threats that the Australian Government is yet to adequately address.

Challenging our assumptions

3. Given the previous, what will digitalization mean for already disadvantaged welfare recipients?

This too is significant.



Challenging our assumptions

The 'digital divide' continues to narrow. But it remains significant in relation to: income, age, employment status, education levels and location.

But, we are now thinking in terms of the advantages that might be generated by digital services.

Interestingly, one interviewee from the government funder commented:

'Our mindset is about the customer now. It hasn't been in the past...we are adopting or we're now doing a lot more user centred...I...just recently...spent a couple of days in Melbourne with disability clients, and we got to do interviews with those job seekers, specifically about digital services, and then we did a workshop. And so through those sorts of things we are gathering information from all sorts of job seekers so that we can better understand what their needs are, and what their issues are, and we will as best as we can try to accommodate all those things. Certainly things like accessibility we're all over, so we manage all that'.

So the purchaser rather than the provider has an interest in how digitisation might improve service delivery.

New research questions

1. What will this mean for the purchaser/provider relationship?

Social services are heavily out-sourced in Australia.

New Public Management (NPM) has delivered some, but not all, of its objectives. Innovation and market diversity are two notable failures.

Delivery agencies tend to work in a low-trust, highly regulated environment.

Our early findings suggest that service digitalization might provide the purchaser with a means of by-passing providers, meaning their influence is diminished.

‘Again, I think this is more about providers being able to control, and it probably sounds a bit harsh, but trying to control what their job seekers are doing so that they know what’s happening and they’ve got visibility of it’.

‘Providers want to kind of keep, not all of them, I must add, but a lot of them tend to want to control what their job seekers are doing, and so they don’t want them doing things online, they want to do it themselves and know what’s going on. So it’s very frustrating’.

New research questions

2. What does this mean for public value?

Public value (Moore, 1995) draws our attention to three key elements in strategic management and policy delivery;

- The authorizing environment – does the program have sufficient political support from key stakeholders?
- The public value of what is being delivered – is the service valued by clients and others?
- Operational feasibility – can the service be efficiently and effectively delivered?

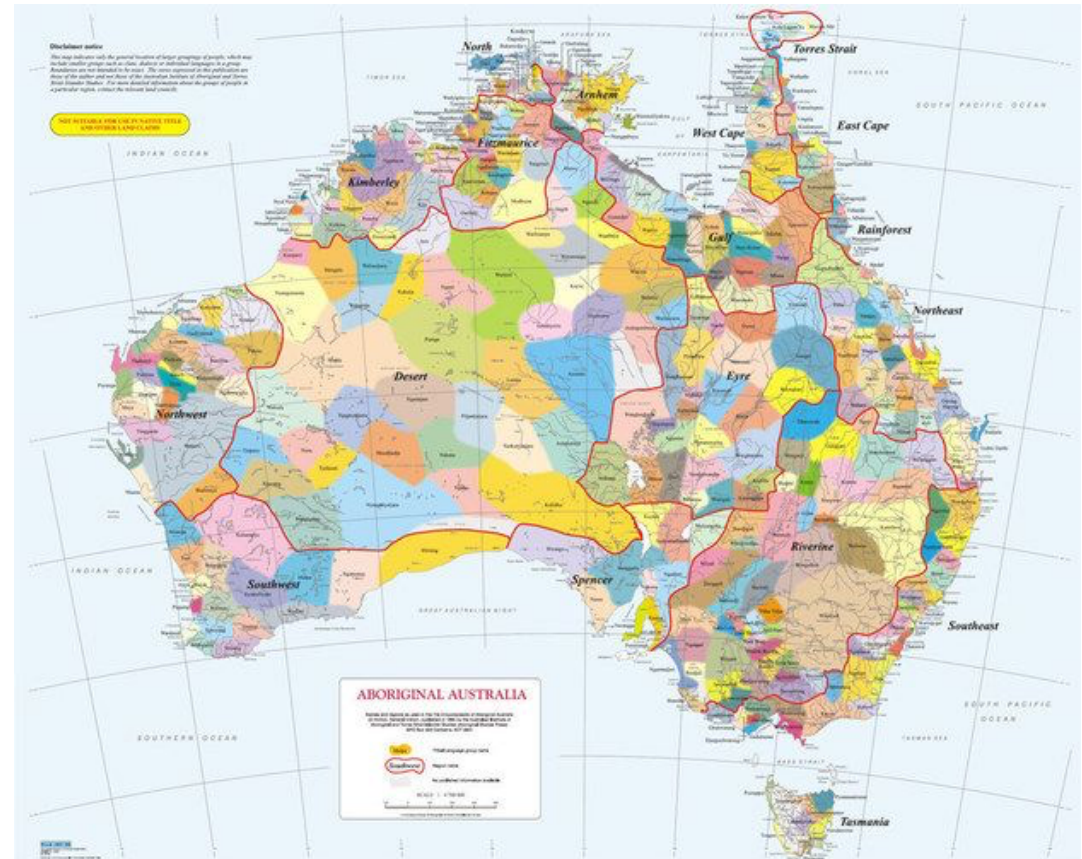
The evidence from this case tends to suggest that activity and interest is focused on resolving the operational feasibility of digitization of social services. So from a public value perspective the case fits neatly into a public value frame for understanding and critiquing what is shaping stakeholder behavior and where this might lead in the future.

Next phase of the research

Currently seeking additional funding.

We would like to convene 3 workshops, each with different stakeholders: government, providers, end-users. Stakeholders will be drawn from around Australia.

We will also visit 2 regional communities, and 2 remote communities in the Northern Territory (NT) and Western Australia (WA). This will allow us to assess how digital services are experienced by some of the most remote/disadvantaged Australians.



References

Commonwealth of Australia (nd), 'Digital Transformation Agenda', <https://www.dta.gov.au/what-we-do/transformation-agenda/#vision>, <accessed 21/7/17>.

NSW Government (2015), 'Digital + 2016: NSW Government ICT Strategy Final Update', https://www.finance.nsw.gov.au/ict/sites/default/files/resources/Digital_Strategy_2016_20151125.pdf, <accessed 21/7/17>.

Deloitte Australia. 2015. 'Digital Government Transformation: Australia Survey Data Analysis Public Sector Research Group'. Deloitte Access Economics, Digital transformation.

Eggers, William D, and Joel Bellman. 2015. 'The Journey to Government's Digital Transformation'. DU Press, October 2. <https://dupress.deloitte.com/dup-us-en/topics/digital-transformation/digital-transformation-in-government.html>.

ABS. 2016. '8146.0 - Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2014-15'. *Australian Bureau of Statistics*. February 18. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/PrimaryMainFeatures/8146.0?OpenDocument>

Scott Ewing, Australian Digital Inclusion Index. 2016. 'New Data on Digital Inclusion from the ABS Household Use of Information Technology, 2014-15'. *Australian Policy Online, Swinburne University of Technology*. February 22. <http://apo.org.au/node/61745>