

Australian Communities Online – Using Geographic Names as Community Domain names

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SUMMARY

Australia has over 27,000 communities living in cities, towns and villages spread across a land mass similar in size to Europe. Many of these communities are geographically isolated far from major centers and services. One of the simplest uniting factors for any community is their geographic name or place name. The World Wide Webs offers an unprecedented means of global communication and an opportunity for communities to interact in a cohesive manner.

In a world first, the Australian Domain Name Administrator (auDA) which is the Australian regulator of the World Wide Web, has created eight (8) new Geographic 2nd Level Domains (2LDs) which will serve the needs of a community of users that are not currently well served by the existing 2LDs. The aim is to provide an intuitive, standardised naming system to enable better access to local community, tourism and business information and to facilitate social and economic benefits to Australian Communities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

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The 8 new 2LDs represent each State and Territory in Australia and all Community Geographic Domain Names (CGDNs) will be registered as 3rd Level Domains (3LDs) in the simple form of town/suburb.state/territory.au (eg. katherine.nt.au). Their use will be restricted to community website portals that reflect community interests such as local business, tourism, historical information, culture, sporting groups, local events and news. The purpose is to preserve Australian geographic names for use by the relevant community.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 History

Following two years of wide-ranging consultation, the auDA Board approved the release of the geographical domain names for community websites use based on recommendations by the New Names Advisory Panel (NNAP). The New Names Advisory Panel was appointed by the auDA Board in June 2002 to evaluate proposals for new second level domains (2LDs) in the .au domain. The Panel completed its work in March 2003.

The NNAP based their recommendations on the proposal by the One City One Site (OCOS) working party and the results of public consultation where there was an overwhelming majority of strong support from a range of sectors covering business and industry, social services, Local Government, State Government, community groups and individuals.

The genesis for this concept began in Bathurst NSW in 2000 by a group of like minded individuals who felt that communities were not being given adequate opportunities to use the

World Wide Web. In addition, geographic names whilst being reserved were increasingly registered overseas to commercial interests. The fundamental principle being geographic names belong to their respective communities and not individuals or corporations.

The One City One Site (OCOS) working party was formed in Bathurst, Australia in 2000 and proposed the release of new geographical 2LDs as a fair and equitable domain name system for reservation, and restricted use, that protects and promotes the geographical area and its community.

A pilot implementation was carried out by OCOS in 3 localities: Ballarat, Bathurst and Wollongong and reviewed by Enterprise Technologies and Human Orientated Systems (ETHOS) laboratory at the University of Wollongong who have been actively involved in the study of community websites and has published at several international conferences on the topic.

2.2 Rules and Guidelines

Policy rules and guidelines were developed by auDA's National Reference Group (NRG) established from a broad range of stakeholders in 2004 to provide the checks and balances to ensure names are preserved specifically for community websites, for and run by the relevant local community. The NRG was comprised of representatives from all levels of Australian government and other community stakeholders to ensure a balanced and equitable approach.

2.3 Key Issues for success

ETHOS's review of the pilot study indicated there was broad acceptance and enthusiasm in the community for this initiative and that the key issues for its' success are:

- Providing facilitation of the process, particularly in engaging local councils as a partner, providing a 'how to kit' and website design and development.
- Endorsement by key stakeholders including Local Government, local Business Chambers and State Government
- Providing a sample community website to demonstrate the concept.

To provide the keys to success, auDA established a not-for-profit company – .au Community Domains (auCD) to facilitate, develop and administrate the CGDNs. auCD provides support services to communities who want to register their geographic domain name for a community website portal and process applications based on the Policy rules and guidelines.

3 POLICY

3.1 Geographic domain names available for registration

Registrants may only license a domain name that is listed in the registry database. The registry database contains the names of all addressable localities (e.g.: suburbs, localities and towns) within each Australian State and Territory. The names basically cover all populated places and are defined by the Committee for Geographical Names in Australasia (CGNA) – the authority on geographic naming in Australia and New Zealand.

Addressable localities are defined as places or locations where populations reside. These include towns, cities, suburbs and rural localities. Any disputes regarding the names will be referred to the CGNA for consideration by the appropriate state/territory geographic names authority.

Geographic names that are non-addressable localities and/or are regarded as names of cultural significance (such as the Great Barrier Reef, capital city names) are not included in the initial available registry.

3.2 Eligibility

To be eligible to licence a community geographic domain name, the registrant must be:

- a legally registered not-for-profit entity e.g., co-operative, and
- representative of the local community for the purpose of holding the domain name licence

Applicants must be able to demonstrate their representation of the local community through membership, ensuring:

- in most cases, recommended to have a minimum of 8 members
- members must represent a broad range of community interests and groups

Individual persons, commercial entities and government bodies are not eligible to licence a community geographic domain name. Under this rule local councils would not be eligible to register domain names on their own behalf. However, auDA recognises the special role of local councils as active and representative members of the local community and are encouraged to be involved in developing this local public asset through membership of the applicant entity. In fact, in many cases the council may be the driving force to create and seek membership for the applicant entity.

There are no restrictions on the number of domain names that may be licenced by a single registrant, provided that it meets the eligibility criteria for each domain name. This rule relates to instances where the local communities in a number of adjoining addressable localities wish to form a single representative entity to manage the domain names and website/s for the whole group. It aims to assist in effective and efficient use of resources

across smaller communities which share geographic boundaries and similarities in a particular geographic area.

3.3 Domain name license conditions

The registrant must use the domain name solely for the purpose of operating a community website on behalf of the local community. The domain name must not be used for the interest or benefit (commercial or otherwise) of an individual person or single entity.

The licence attracts a nominal fee, which is used to cover administrative costs. The licence is for a term of two years which is renewable upon satisfaction of simple performance criteria.

4 STANDARDS & BENEFITS

The policy rules and guidelines state that the website must be developed for the benefit of the entire community, including all communities of interest within the local community. As the website is developed for and on behalf of the community, it must remain accurate, relevant and up-to-date.

As a guideline, website base content should include but is not limited to:

- community events
- local business directory
- community directory
- general information about the community
- sport
- leisure
- local news
- and a community feedback facility

To provide evidence of their ability to establish and maintain the website for the local community in an effective and timely manner, the community should demonstrate what methods of funding would be developed to fund the website and its maintenance. Support and revenue sources may include government or non-government funding, sponsorship, website advertising, monetary and in-kind donations and contributions.

Although there are many “community websites” on the internet – most are run and managed by government or commercial organisations. They are not run by the community as a whole so aren’t totally representative of the community as a whole. The CGDNs aims to overcome this by providing community groups with an opportunity to develop websites that would “pull together” a variety of community resources, activities and organisations to a single location on-line.

The CGDNs are a useful tool to improve a communities’ social capital. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) definition of social capital is:

“networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or among groups.”

Some of the benefits of the CGDNs:

For the Community:

- Logical geographic name – provides an excellent filter to locate the central source of information on that community.
- Services users that would not normally be able to participate by increasing the role of public access to the internet, e.g. charities, community groups.
- Allows for civic participation in government and private sector activities.

For Local Government:

- Highlights key issues and events plus the ability to learn about ongoing community projects.

For State Government:

- Allows “arms length” funding for them to be involved in a project which should become self-sustaining.

5 CONCLUSION

Whilst it is still early days for this initiative, the goal is to have 100 communities up and running in the first year, increasing to 300 per annum over the following three years. This is a conservative but realistic target given existing resources and the unknown rate of takeup, however marketing and promotion and benefits realization should generate some considerable momentum.

In a society which is becoming more hedonistic, technology dependent and the gap widening between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’, this new initiative can overcome isolation and bring communities together to function and interact as a cohesive group using the World Wide Web which is ubiquitous. Widespread community acceptance of this new approach will be the challenge over the next few years.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Paul Harcombe

Paul Harcombe is the Chief Surveyor, Land and Property Information NSW (LPINSW) within the Department of Lands. Paul is also Chairman of the NSW Survey and Mapping Managers Forum and a Member of the NSW Survey and Mapping Industry Council. His primary responsibilities include management of the State Survey System, and statutory functions involving approximately 70 staff across NSW. He holds a Bachelor in Surveying from the University of New South Wales and also a Master of Geomatics from the University of Melbourne. He has a broad background in surveying and land information.

Paul is also the Deputy President of the NSW Board of Surveying and Spatial Information which regulates land and mining surveying activities and advises Government on Spatial Information matters. He is also Deputy Chair of the Geographical Names Board of NSW.

Other positions held include Chairman of the Intergovernmental Committee for Surveying and Mapping (ICSM) and member of the University of NSW Dean of Engineering Advisory Committee as well as being on academic advisory boards for surveying and spatial information schools at Melbourne and New South Wales Universities.

Paul was recently appointed as an inaugural Director of auCD – a not for profit company established to manage the allocation of geographical names for use by Australian communities as Second level Internet Domain Names.

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