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WIRELESS TECHNOLOGIES AND CULTURES: TOWARDS AN AGENDA FOR RESEARCH

Abstract

Governments and big business tout the affordances of new technologies, but there is little research available that tells us why wireless connectivity should be or is desirable, or shows that its benefits have fully been established. In our minds, wireless technologies and cultures have not been given the sustained attention they deserve. Informed by these concerns, our hope is that this special issue, which follows on from a 2006 workshop sponsored by the 'Cultural Technologies' node of the ARC Cultural Research Network, will promote debate and further research into wireless technologies and cultures in the Australian and New Zealand regions.

By the time this issue of *MIA* comes off the press, Australia's long 2007 election campaign will finally be over, and with it some of the intensity of debates around one of the significant policy differences between the two competing major parties: wireless broadband infrastructure. Whatever the election outcome, it is clear that IT is back on the agenda — for politicians and big business alike.

The two models on offer in many ways encapsulated the lingering ideological split in a political contest not memorable for its differences. The Coalition chose to promote partnership with Optus and Elders, particularly to make up the shortfall in delivering cutting-edge wireless provision to its welded-on constituents in the bush. On the other hand, the Labor Party model, while also in partnership with industry, was much more loudly couched in terms of government's *responsibility* to provide high-speed broadband access in an information age. Describing its policy in terms of previous nation-building exercises such as rail and road networks, the ALP's plan for digital networks and an *information* superhighway drew on the Future Fund established by the Liberal Party in a time of economic stability. It was welcome and perhaps overdue recognition of the fact that the internet is a crucial foundation for large sectors of the contemporary market economy.

Indeed, in heralding the laptop as the 'toolbox for the twenty-first century' and initiating a range of measures and incentives for families to invest in technologies for their children's future, Kevin Rudd raised the stakes on previous attempts to bring new media into the realm of civics and citizenship. But such a gesture also demands vigorous debate about the skills and competencies that need to be developed and relayed in schools and tertiary education in conjunction with such a shift, as part of a more thoroughgoing overhaul of the range of literacies

appropriate for an information economy. (As it so happens, 'digital literacies' will feature as the theme of a forthcoming edition of *MIA* in 2008.) Thinking about how important new opportunities like pay and digital television have been managed by previous government policies, we are genuinely concerned about the claims currently being made about wireless technologies — especially when this manifests as providing access to broadband as the simple answer to the transition from a manual labour economy to the 'weightless' sectors of services and communication. Coming from the Labor Party, this is even more problematic when it refuses to relate this transition in any useful way to its history of trade unionism. If we know anything from present experience, it is that the widespread uptake of always-on technologies will demand a reinvigorated understanding of workers' rights to limited hours.

Leaving the particularities of policy issues to one side, however (for electoral promises and cycles are never reliable bases for producing scholarship), the timing of this special issue of *Media International Australia* is intended to provide a small intervention — one which, if it does not explicitly challenge the growing consensus that citizens need to 'be connected' to fully participate in and enjoy the benefits of a modern democratic society, at least offers new questions to be asking of ourselves along the way. The idea that we should necessarily be enamoured and charmed by the promise of more and better technologies ('high-speed internet *40 times* the speed of what we have now', as Labor's election material promoted) seems like an increasingly dangerous form of common sense at work in our culture today. Despite its implications — of machines sensing our presence, of being part of a virtual grid, of Big Brother-style surveillance — already being the stuff of science fiction for decades, we are only beginning to make sense of the potential applications of wireless technology — not only in terms of the way that it threatens both our privacy and our free time (and how it changes our experience of each) but the way that it may be implicated in new forms of anxiety, compulsion and constraint. These negative aspects that accompany ordinary people's attempts to try to manage the vast quantities of information being delivered by various networked devices are rarely entertained in the rush to embrace increasingly greater speeds and storage room.

While governments and big business tout the affordances of new technologies, as scholars we have found precious little research available that tells us why wireless connectivity should be or is desirable, or shows that its benefits have been fully established — indeed, there is scant evidence that would indicate whether the provision of wireless connectivity isn't simply another way in which existing and powerful interests in society might continue to be assured. These are just some of the perspectives that a media and cultural studies approach to wireless can provide, and both editors of this issue are currently engaged in some large-scale research projects to contribute to such an endeavour.

Informed by these concerns, this collection of papers follows on from a very stimulating workshop we organised in December 2006, sponsored by the 'Cultural Technologies' node of the ARC Cultural Research Network. This workshop brought together a number of speakers and participants from across Australia,

from New Zealand, the United Kingdom and also the United States. Participants also spanned academic disciplines, as well as industry, community, art and cultural organisations. What was evident to us was a flourishing of work around wireless technologies, yet a need in the Australian context especially for conversations, critical discussion and research directions to be shared and debated. While there has been a great deal of academic, community, government and industry work on digital technologies in Australia, and much important critical and scholarly work in particular, in our minds wireless technologies and cultures have not been given the sustained attention they deserve.

Elsewhere in the world — for instance, in Britain and the United States — wireless technologies such as Wi-Fi have been widely discussed, with the imagining of desirable futures often at the centre of public attention. Adrian McKenzie's paper in this issue — as well as his previous writing on wireless — is an excellent overview of such debates. His comparison of the various competing claims to deliver the one inarguable good, *connectedness*, illuminates how wireless has been seen to inaugurate everything from a new mode of pervasive computing, of digital, networked experience, of domestication of technology, and of the reconfiguration of daily and material life. The construction of commercial, consumer or public and open wireless networks has been an important theme in arguments over the nature of civic and urban life, and in the formulation of alternative, citizen and community media. Wireless technologies have also been of keen interest to the new industrial reshaping of digital technologies, with the rise of Wi-Fi hot-spots and in-home wireless routers creating strong markets for laptop computers, handheld and wireless devices. Our hope is that this special issue will promote debate and further research into wireless technologies and cultures in the Australian and New Zealand regions. While we are very pleased to present papers with a variety of understandings of wireless, we have also encouraged the authors to be careful about recognising the specificity of the technologies and their settings. To us and many of the contributors we have amassed, there is something notable about wireless culture that has yet to be distinguished.

To some extent, this is due to the wider context of new media studies research that for the moment appears to fetishise the internet and mobile phone as favoured analytic objects, alongside the young people that are taken to be their normative users. In this issue, we have wanted to avoid such generational divisions that are equally favoured in the mainstream press to allow the conceptual sophistication necessary to contemplate issues that are more philosophical in focus and encompassing in scale. In this regard, Zita Joyce's contribution, which theorises the 'space' of wirelessness, is a groundbreaking attempt to come to terms with the sensations and expectations that wireless connectivity allows us to experience. If dominant modes of research have helped to reveal how 'mobile' has taken on its second meaning as a noun in our culture, Joyce's paper helps us speculate whether 'wireless' has instead some of the characteristics of an ontology, even an epistemology: a way of being in and knowing the world in a quite different sense to which we have been habituated.

A further feature of this issue is to include cross-cultural and historical studies of wireless which enable us to see resonances and continuities in the discourses celebrating wireless, or its alleged benefits. The issue opens with Jock Given's 'Talking Over Water: History, Wireless and the Telephone', providing a rich historical perspective on wireless technology. Drawing from his history of radio in Australia, and forthcoming biography of Ernest Fiske, Jock discusses early wireless telephony, and offers a reflection on how its global reach contrasts with today's counterparts. In her 'Freedom to Work: The Impact of Wireless on Labour Politics', Melissa Gregg gives a compelling account of the changing relations of work and subjectivity, and looks at how wireless fits very neatly, and very problematically, into these new regimes. Jo Ann Tacchi and Benjamin Grubb look at the way that wireless technology has been taken up as an innovative information and communication infrastructure in the Kothmale region of Sri Lanka. In the 'The Case of the E-Tuktuk', they present a resonant study of how this mobile technology is highly meaningful in social, political, economic and cultural senses that have both modern and ancient significance.

The final two papers both address the politics of wireless as they relate to enclosure and control. Mark Andrejevic's 'Ubiquitous Computing and the Digital Enclosure Movement' situates commercial developments in wireless technologies in the broader context of momentous struggles over digital technology and culture. He takes issue with how particular sites and companies are currently being shaped, as well as offering an alternative perspective to widely received contemporary accounts. In his 'An Australian Wireless Commons?' Gerard Goggin looks at the development of Wi-Fi and WiMax in Australia, and argues for the productiveness of the 'wireless commons' as a way of moving beyond the aporia of current communications policy.

This combination of papers allows us to see the novelty that different cultural contexts bring to bear on our own normative understandings and expectations of a given technology. We hope that together they reveal the value of cultural research for forcing us to come to terms with the biases that define our current deployment of new platforms and the imagination we have for their future and better applications.

We believe the papers succeed both in precisely locating the technological objects, practices and discourses they analyse, but also, very appropriately, in relating wireless technologies to other important communication ecologies, mediascapes, cultural dialectics, and social relations and transformations. So we thank the authors for their papers, which make available a rich body of resources and perspectives on wireless technologies.

Our thanks also to the presenters and participants in the original workshop, and to the Cultural Research Network for the support that made it possible. A number of papers given on the day have been developed for publication here, although we would also like to mention with appreciation the opening address by Genevieve Bell of Intel Corporation, as well as the important contributions of Chris Chesher, Marcus Foth and Katrina Jungnickel. In fact, our cover images have kindly been provided by Kat, whose own empirical research into cultures

of wireless in Adelaide was being written up at the time we were compiling this issue. It promises to lay further foundations for this emerging field. We also wish to express our gratitude to the reviewers of this papers, and to Sue Jarvis, *MIA*'s terrific production editor, for her assistance.

As we offer this collection in the spirit of taking forward cultural and social research on wireless, especially in Australia, we editors are planning a large-scale national study coming out of this anthology with the assistance of the Cultural Research Network's 'Mobile and Wireless' working group. The cool aesthetics of wireless advertising combined with the persistent (and persistently misplaced) glamour left over from the dot.com boom still cloud perceptions of wireless as being the domain of the boardroom, the café or the inner-city minimalist apartment. Our future research aims to question this monolithic and commercially friendly imaginary to reflect the diversity of vernacular innovations that attend this and every other communication technology Australians have keenly adopted. In the meantime, we commend these papers to their readers, and look forward to the debate they will engender.

Acknowledgments

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