

A Submission to the Australian Digital Economy Strategy

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November 2017
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Version 1.0
DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.5711455

Note: *This document was submitted as an open, personal submission to the Digital Economy Strategy consultation on 30 November 2017. Since that submission other authors have expressed their desire to collaborate on an extended version, which we intend to expand on comment and proposals. We aim to have this work completed in January 2017 with progress available at: <https://goo.gl/R3ZxBJ>*

In this submission I critique the premise of the [Australian Digital Economy consultation paper](#), evaluate the open data of the public consultation, and make a number of proposals based in humanism.

Summary:

The Consultation Paper has contradicted its byline - “opening up the conversation”, by narrowing the spectrum of discourse to the perspective of business, industry, jobs and global competition. This narrowing may be a reason for the extremely low levels of engagement in the open online consultation. Mitigations should be put in place to help the Department investigate the reasons for the low response, and control for any confirmation bias that the consultation is probably generating.

Proposals:

The proposals in this submission are largely outside the scope of the consultation paper questions, and are submitted on the premise that humanism helps to maintain a generative culture that underpins knowledge, innovation and entrepreneurialism (Braunerhjelm 2010).

1. Make explicit room in the “open conversation” around a “digital economy” for humanist perspectives (L. Blackall 2017).
2. Acknowledge and convene responses to the urgent social issues surrounding the concentration of power and wealth through data, surveillance and autonomous technologies (Brown 2017).
3. Invert dominant practices in public and part-public education and research institutions relating to the management of intellectual property and the imputation of knowledge commodification (Blackall & Neill 2010; Noble 2015).

4. Consider a more free and unrestricted information and content network as infrastructure for a “knowledge economy”, and invest accordingly (Leigh Blackall 2017).
5. Develop an ethical framework for ubiquitous learning that serves to delay the commodification and closure of knowledge toward ignorance (Blackall 2013).

Keywords: economy, entrepreneurship, policy, implications, Australia, digital, humanism,

“Opening up the conversation”

The Australian Government’s Department of Industry Innovation and Science appears to agree that openness is an important, if extremely challenging, feature of the Australian digital economy. They signal their agreement by adding a byline to the public consultation project’s title, “*The Digital Economy: Opening up the conversation*”, and then demonstrating that agreement with [a public web page](#); a [consultation paper](#); a public [deliberation space](#); a designated hashtag ‘[#AusDigEcon](#)’; a [submissions management system](#); a mailing address and an [email address](#).

What is generally understood by the word “open” as it is used within the byline, “opening up the conversation”? In software engineering circles the word derives from open source software development, inspiring “crowd source” practices more broadly. In the technology sector, openness is usually limited to an open invitation for people to contribute and participate within certain terms or parameters. This is probably the openness that the Department meant. To people outside the technology sector, openness can be more than an open invitation. It can signal open-endedness, open scope, open mindedness, open heartedness, and of course, a revealing transparency - such as in an open letter, or this open submission. It appears that these wider understandings of the word ‘open’ are not being encouraged by the Department.

The Consultation Paper limited and restricted the scope for conversation. The public consultation period was limited in time; the deliberation space and the submissions management system both re-emphasised the limited scope of the Paper and did not facilitate open collaboration; and finally, the available public data that was generated from the consultation shows an extremely low response or facilitation, evidencing a failure in “opening up the conversation” in any understanding of the phrase.

Evaluating the public response to the consultation

I conducted an analysis at two points in the consultation timeline, to evaluate the online public consultation process. The first point was ten days before the end of the consultation period, and the second was at the close of that period. In the final 5 days of the period I posted my own submissions into the [#ausdigecon](#) hashtag stream on Twitter and Facebook, as well as to the formal deliberation space.

Ten days before close

I submitted the URL for the main deliberation space for the online consultation for preservation on The WayBack Machine ten days before the closing date of the public consultation¹. The response at this point was 21 posts that had attracted 40 comments and 20 votes, with several comments being from the Department thanking contributors. Surveying the Internet by way of a Google search for “[#ausdigecon](#)” revealed 32 unique Twitter posts and no news or videos. Facebook and LinkedIn searches revealed two posts

¹ <https://engage.industry.gov.au> was preserved at <https://web.archive.org/web/20171120014028/https://engage.industry.gov.au/>

each. Youtube and Wikipedia contained nothing, including broader search terms than the hashtag, as well as looking at the English Wikipedia article and talk page for the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science².

At the end of the consultation period there were a further 18 contributions to the deliberation space, attracting 13 comments and 12 votes. Across the internet Google search found no news or video. There were another 34 unique posts to Twitter. No further posts on LinkedIn and no further posts to Facebook. Youtube had nothing for the search and the English Wikipedia article and talk page for the Department made no reference to the project and remained unedited since 9 November 2017.

My own contributions were made in the final 5 days of the consultation period and included six posts to the deliberation space, attracting 3 comments and 1 vote. One of my posts to the deliberation space was “locked” by a moderator without explanation, preventing comments or votes to that post. I asked the moderators for an explanation, by way of comment in another post, but received no reply. I forwarded all these posts into the Twitter #ausdigecon stream, along with three other posts to Twitter, all of which auto forwarding into Facebook. Five posts to Twitter received “likes”, one post received 5 likes, 1 repost and 1 reply.

Online response to the public consultation ten days before close		
Service	Provider	Results
WayBack Machine	Internet Archive	6 pages archived
Engage.Industry	Department of Industry'	21, 40 comments, 20 votes
#ausdigecon	Google Search	32 Twitter posts
Facebook	Facebook	2
LinkedIn	Microsoft	2
Youtube	Google	0
Wikipedia	Wikimedia Foundation	0

Online response to the public consultation at close		
Service	Provider	Results
WayBack Machine	Internet Archive	4 further pages archived
Engage.Industry	Department of Industry'	18, 13 comments, 12 votes
#ausdigecon	Google Search	34 Twitter posts
Facebook	Facebook	0
LinkedIn	Microsoft	0
Youtube	Google	0

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Department_of_Industry,_Innovation_and_Science

Wikipedia	Wikimedia Foundation	0
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A comment on the response

This is a response to a nation wide public consultation. A consultation that set out to “open the conversation” on the premise that open collaboration is an effective way of gathering insight. The data gathered was to inform a strategy that will direct us through an apparently grave moment in social and technological history - a moment that is affecting most public institutions, media, businesses large and small, society, community, family and public services, perhaps even our democratic wellbeing. Suffice to say the public response to the consultation, at least by measure of the open online deliberation spaces, was extremely low or, about as low as you could possibly get.

The question then is, what will the Department do with this result? Will it be declared a success and the project then moved on in its timeline toward a planned outcome? Or will it be declared a failure and require a rerun in some form, perhaps with a different set of premises?

Perhaps the Department will find that it is extremely difficult to generate interest and engagement around the notion of a strategy for a digital economy. Either it is the notion and its premises, or it is that the Australian population and its representative institutions and private enterprises are not well positioned for such an economy.

Other useful data sources

It would appear that online methods of “open” consultation are a theatre to themselves. [The last time I did an analysis like this](#) was on the #ShapeRMIT public consultation campaign, revealing very similar results. That, of course, was a similarly “successful” public consultation, and the resulting strategic plan is now the daily, and only, reference that management seem able to make for what they deem to be necessary.

The open conversation in both these cases, #ShapeRMIT and #AusDigEcon were already taking place long before those formal hashtags were nominated, and will continue long after hashtags are useful. As an example, here is a list of keywords that offer data relevant to #AusdigEcon. Perhaps an analysis of these and other keywords would generate a more stimulating consultation paper.

Technopoly Digital humanities Black Mirror PirateBay Free Software	Digital Infrastructure Digital Citizenship Digital Futures Industry 4.0 Digital Innovation	Digital economy Occupy Wikileaks Net neutrality Gov 2.0
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Why so little open conversation?

The Department's promotion, reach and facilitation issues aside, the public - including the institutions and organisations that represent a range of interests in issues relating to a "digital economy", were either not interested in an open online deliberation around the notion of a "digital economy", and/or not interested in how the Department framed the scope of conversation. Either way, the low response is itself a significant indication for what the Australian digital economy will look like: Largely disinterested in open collaboration; disconnected and disengaged from government initiatives; and without any relevant direction or leadership pertaining to the many issues confronting our society and its economy.

"... The shift we are undergoing, as every sector becomes data-driven, is similar in scale to the social and economic shift that took place when the world moved from being agriculture-centric to manufacturing-centric."

Ministerial preface, [P3 of the Consultation Paper](#)

When the Department gave the project a significant level of historic gravity, and then set out to "open up the conversation" with online forums that generate open data, they probably expected more public engagement. So why has the public response been so minimal?

The premise of strategy

The consultation paper contained a preface and introduction sections that conveyed the premises of the project, leading into four stimulus topics that derived from those premises.

The preface was signed by the government minister for the Department, which is a common formality for Australian government projects - presumably done to give the project and its sponsors a sense of government oversight in the proceedings. To contrast, and thereby to illustrate the significance in that gesture, imagine if a philosopher, artist, historian or indigenous elder were used to preface the paper instead?

Perhaps the Department, and government more broadly, would do better in public consultations if it was to make itself as anonymous and unobtrusive as possible³. Would a more backstage and quietly facilitatory presence have helped, hindered or had no bearing on the open discussion and collaboration in this process?

The highlighted leaders

Beyond the significance of the Minister's signature, the preface gave a historic gravity to what it worryingly described as a "data-driven digital economy", likened to the industrial

³ As is an ancient wisdom, not only articulated by the Chinese philosophy of Laozi, popularised in the West by Alan Watts in the mid 20th century, largely through radio and television, such as in [this audio recording at 39 minutes](#).

shocks and revolutions across the 18th and 19th centuries, well into the 20th, all with an ominous sense of technological determinism.

With that gravity, the emphasis was placed on notions of 'national productivity and competitiveness' - instead of say, localised development and cooperation. Groups of people were categorised as 'governments, business and the community' - instead of perhaps, regions, cultures and generations. Specifically mentioned sectors of those groups were 'energy, resources, medicine, mining, finance and agriculture - instead of education, arts and culture, or public health.

The Department seems to want these categories and sectors of people to lead us through the impending digital revolution and "grow Australian industry and jobs" - a crude measure of economic outcome was given in a dollar value of \$110 billion over eight years. Social issues are set apart with words like "empowerment" through "skills and inclusion" where we will ensure that "all Australians take the journey", specifically through broadband internet for low income households, people over 65, and those with disabilities.

A tone of aggressive global competition in business and finance

"The rest of the world will not wait for us. We need to make the most of digital technologies to develop a diverse and flexible economic base, so that businesses can seize domestic and international opportunities that play to their competitive strengths. Businesses that use and invest in digital technologies tend to be more productive and competitive. We need to look forward at emerging technologies to harness new opportunities for growth."

Unknown Department author, Introduction to the Consultation Paper

Can we hope for wonder?

Despite the historic gravity given to this by the Department - apparently equal if not more profound than the massive, multi generational, traumatic "revolution" of industry over more than two centuries, it was clearly too much for their writers to transcend the narrowed politics and economic perspectives of the day, and find someone or something that would provoke a broader audience with more ranging and engaging concerns.

So, as is so often the case in my experience of this "digital revolution" - where most of our 'governments, businesses and communities' have failed to grasp even the basic evidence, signifiers and grim realities, I looked online and around me for something more meaningful and compelling, to include in my submission. The focal points I submit for consideration are in history, culture, humanism, new flows of information, public knowledge and informal democracy. My own premises are that these broader areas form the cultural basis of what the Department is focused on. The Department, however, through its consultation paper and deliberation space, seems to want to avoid discussion of these broader areas, choosing to focus on a pragmatically reduced conversation of manageable possibility and outcome.

My submissions

The following text could not be satisfactorily placed within the specific topic areas and questions asked by the Department in their submissions management system, which are based on the same topics and questions listed in the Consultation Paper. My submissions draw from the following summarised proposals:

1. Make explicit room in the “open conversation” around a “digital economy” for humanist perspectives (L. Blackall 2017).
2. Acknowledge and convene responses to the urgent social issues surrounding the concentration of power and wealth through data, surveillance and autonomous technologies (Brown 2017).
3. Invert dominant practices in public and part-public education and research institutions relating to the management of intellectual property and the imputation of knowledge commodification (Blackall & Neill 2010; Noble 2015).
4. Consider a more free and unrestricted information and content network as infrastructure for a “knowledge economy”, and invest accordingly (Leigh Blackall 2017).
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I sincerely hope the public will be able to see a great many more submissions, and that they be as wildly diverse and stimulating as possible. I wish that these could be made in many forms, from the structured form text we've been given, through to art, music and theatre, and any other possible expression that communicates. I hope that the Department has the resources and capacity to study and synthesize such a range, and present a most wonderfully unique, challenging and impressively relevant statement that can be. And finally I hope that we, the combined Australian society, will be surprised and enlivened by the result.

I guess by all that I mean, imagine what could have been.

A more expanded version of proposals will continue to be authored on top of this initial submission. It will include the work of other authors, and make wider reference and comment. Please visit <https://goo.gl/R3ZxBJ> and feel free to leave comment or make suggestions to this work.

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