The promise of information technology?

Richard Pamatatau

The promise of information technology is a more connected, equal and better world but the reality for many is far from that. Anything to do with the Internet, computers and technology seems to carry an exuberant freight–much of it around making the planet a better place to live.

This so-called e-enabled world will be populated by people who are more informed because they are better connected. They will have more information at their finger tips and because of that be better able to navigate modern life.

And because the development of technology is relentless, things will just get better and better.

If you lived in the not too distant past the railway network could have been seen in a similar way. Rail companies, like the Internet brought people together from across large distances, and it didn't matter whether you were rich or poor, the door was open if you could afford a ticket to ride.

The same could be said of air travel where the "tyranny of distance" was tamed by sitting in a kerosene-fueled taxi that could fly you away.

Of course both the rail and air networks are dependent on infrastructure–you can't just take a train or plane anywhere– and so too is the Internet–that new way of traveling that can be almost as real as being there.

Anyone who has used modern computer based systems knows this–just look at the number of people holding online conversations via a computer in a virtual and moderately private environment.

And this can't be a bad thing–after all it is accepted that most human beings have a right to speak and be heard.

(Whether anybody listens is a different matter.)

Sitting with these thoughts is some new research from Statistics New Zealand.

It announced on March 7 that Internet broadband (non-analog) subscriber numbers had increased by nearly 30 percent in the six months to 30 September 2006,

The information from a six monthly survey of the country's Internet service companies shows the total number of Internet subscribers in New Zealand is now almost 1.4 million. The number of dial-up subscribers continues to fall with 5.1 percent fewer subscribers than at the end of March 2006.

The number of broadband subscribers per 100 inhabitants grew from 9.0 to 14.7 in the year ended September 2006 and sustained broadband growth helped New Zealand shift up to 19th from 22nd on the OECD June 2006 ranking.

...no one came to New Zealand from some other place to have a worse life.

Of all broadband subscribers, 97.6% had a data allowance cap on their subscription, with over two-thirds having a cap of under 5GB.

In the 18 months to September 2006, 34% fewer Internet service providers reported that the regulatory environment relating to telecommunications had been a barrier to growth in the previous two years.

It seems to look pretty good.

But not to Ernie Newman, the chief executive of the telecommunications users association (TUANZ). On March 10, 2007 he wrote on his organisation's web-site.

> Oops! 'Downstream' was excited by this week's announcement about Statistics NZ's survey claiming New Zealand had reached 19th in the OECD broadband uptake table after languishing for years at number 23.

> Sadly, it seems Statistics NZ were wrong. Their survey includes 3G mobile broadband access, an extremely expensive premium product that the OECD does not include. Most people would not regard it as a direct substitute, hence the OECD declining to include it in their survey.

> You can make a case to measure broadband a number of ways. What you can't justify is taking a survey that includes mobile, overlaying it on somebody else's survey that doesn't, and claiming a breakthrough. Sorry guys, it doesn't stack up.

For Mr Newman that's a fair-enough attack–after all he's in the business of demanding more, for less if possible, to keep his members happy.

His argument has some merit too–backed by the clear need for his members many who are in trade and commerce to have best access to tools.

Isn't that a continuing conversation–or lament–that business in New Zealand is being hampered by lack of broadband penetration because the data cannot be moved around quickly and cheaply?

Other people would like tools too–and in particular members of New Zealand's growing ethnic communities–particularly those who feature top of all the bad statistics and bottom of the good.

This sector appears to be populated by Pacific and Māori people who are disproportionately represented in the information underclass followed by new migrants and refugees.

Another way of describing this group is to gather them all up with a word–vibrant.

That basket is an exclusionary term that allows an elite group to label and almost sanitise a group of often underprivileged people. What are the people who are not vibrant and multi-cultural?

Do the people who live in a vibrant, which often means poor suburb, have a term for those outside their group?

I recall many years ago while working as an information technology journalist, a conversation with the then headmaster of Tamaki College John Grant. It was at a time when expensive private schools like Saint Kentigern and Kings College were introducing laptops as part of school kit with wireless networks to match.

Mr Grant said at the time he was more interested in breakfast for all, and the programme his school offered dealt with making sure kids had full tummies before class started.

That conversation was over 10 years ago and for some there has been much needed progress.

Others continue to languish.

There is a street in Panmure, a suburb in Auckland City, where two of the homes are not on the phone. How can that be in this day and age you might ask?

In one lives a man from Samoa who has not worked for 12 years. He would love to work full-time and told me he would be happy to earn $12 an hour, hopefully somewhere within walking distance or on a bus route.

His English is poor but his aesthetic sense rich when it comes to gardening but you'll never see him at the Ellerslie Flower Show.

Behind his state house is an immaculate garden–he grows potatoes, tomatoes, taro, nashi pears, peaches, avocadoes, spinach, bananas and flowers as do many of his neighbours. At the front is a tree that is a living sculpture, topiary without pretense and tended delicately with scissors. This man has never read The Cat in the Hat but this tree would fit straight in there with its naïve balls of green. When he wants to ring someone he asks neighbours "for a use of the phones".

Most recently he asked me "for you to ring of the taxis to take my visitors homes".

He brings chop suey and spinach as a present and when he cut my hedge for a fee with a machete he pleached it because he said it need a "goods cut".

In the other home without a phone is a young woman, her two year old daughter and at the moment her partner, an unemployed man who makes extra money cleaning car windscreens at the lights.

They are both "ethnic" or "vibrant" and poor.

When she needs to use the phone it's normally because she has been fighting with her partner and she is worried about her safety. After they've screamed at each other for hours she will run to a neighbour's house because her partner is chasing her with a machete or a piece of wood. Other neighbours say they seen furniture thrown through the window.

For another person in the street who has "the phone on" the promises offered by the broadband world are irrelevant at the moment.

Especially when as a single parent bringing up a baby who has spent most of his life in the Starship Hospital she has to cope when the black power gang move in next door.

No doubt Housing New Zealand has a broadband network and the best intentions but that's cold comfort when violence is just through the wall. Just through the wall.

It's also a gross disregard for personal safety because the house that the black power lived in before the warring couple who left in the middle of the night has been empty for five weeks with the doors open.

Vagrants have come and stayed, including a young Pacific-looking man–more violent than vibrant who went round the neighbourhood selling a lawn-mower knocking on doors as early as 7.20am. He wanted a fix, some glue that might be a temporary salve to his non-Internet, no email disintegrating world.

And what does this have to do with ethnic people.

In parts of New Zealand the simple fact is most of them are excluded from many of these debates around information technology and communications.

There is nothing new about this and it is unlikely to change quickly despite the best intentions of politicians on any side of the house, educationalists, community workers or anybody wanting to try and make a difference.

But it flys in the face of the popular view of information technology from the non-vibrant people who see the Internet as something to give the voiceless and choiceless a chance to speak.

How is the gardening man who barely speaks English, but is fluent in formal and informal Samoan going to "represent" on-line when he sometimes goes fishing to put food on his table?

Have the connections been made between the persistent domestic violence between the young woman with a baby, calls to the police and the cost of repairs to a house that is owned by the state?

Or is she a number languishing in a database on a server in Wellington, a case-number locked in a box?

Will the woman fearful about the kind of family moving in next door to her be able to have some say?

I can't see it changing fast either in spite of the best intentions of politicians, educators and anybody else wanting to make a change in how our poorer people live their lives because there seems to be a huge disconnect between policy and reality. Though they are trying and there is money in a pot for projects and pilots that might just help.

On a brighter and more optimistic note though when Bill Gates the Microsoft boss came to New Zealand for the first time in the 1990s his multimedia seminar opened with a

waiata composed by Dr Pita Sharples.

I will never forget it–a stage in the Aotea Centre was alive with Māori performing Mihini Atea. The translation means Space Machines–and it was Dr Sharple's take on the space invader game phenomenon which had taken much of the world by storm earlier in the century.

For me as an observer the point was very clear and very funny.

"Vibrant people" are more than capable of identifying and wanting the benefits of the Internet and communications age. (Just look at the number of Phds in computer science for example being generated in India).

And no one came to New Zealand from some other place to have a worse life.

And it's not culture, or ethnicity or any of those things that prevent Māori, or Pacific, or any of the rest of the vibrant world from embracing this IT heaven.

It's the money and the fact that many are more worried about food on the table then getting themselves connected.

It's been suggested that the all powerful Pacific churches get more involved and set up community computer labs–that might be an answer.

Again I was at a ceremony in a Manukau City pre-school where the staff was talking about using the new computer as a tool to get family members more comfortable with technology.

That's a very good idea and fits in with the pragmatic view of the City of Manukau Education Trust which sees literacy as a primary tool to improve people's lives and helped the pre-school get a computer[1].

There's never going to be universal empowerment for vibrant people from the Internet and computers, it didn't happen with the printing press, or the phone or television. But what will happen over time is a gradual shift in standards.

And of course the Samoan gardener and his many friends might have to consider making some changes too–like getting the phone on for a start.

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1   See Kate Sutton's article in this issue of AENJ for more about this project.