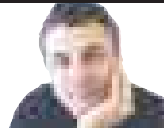


Fighting for broadband rights

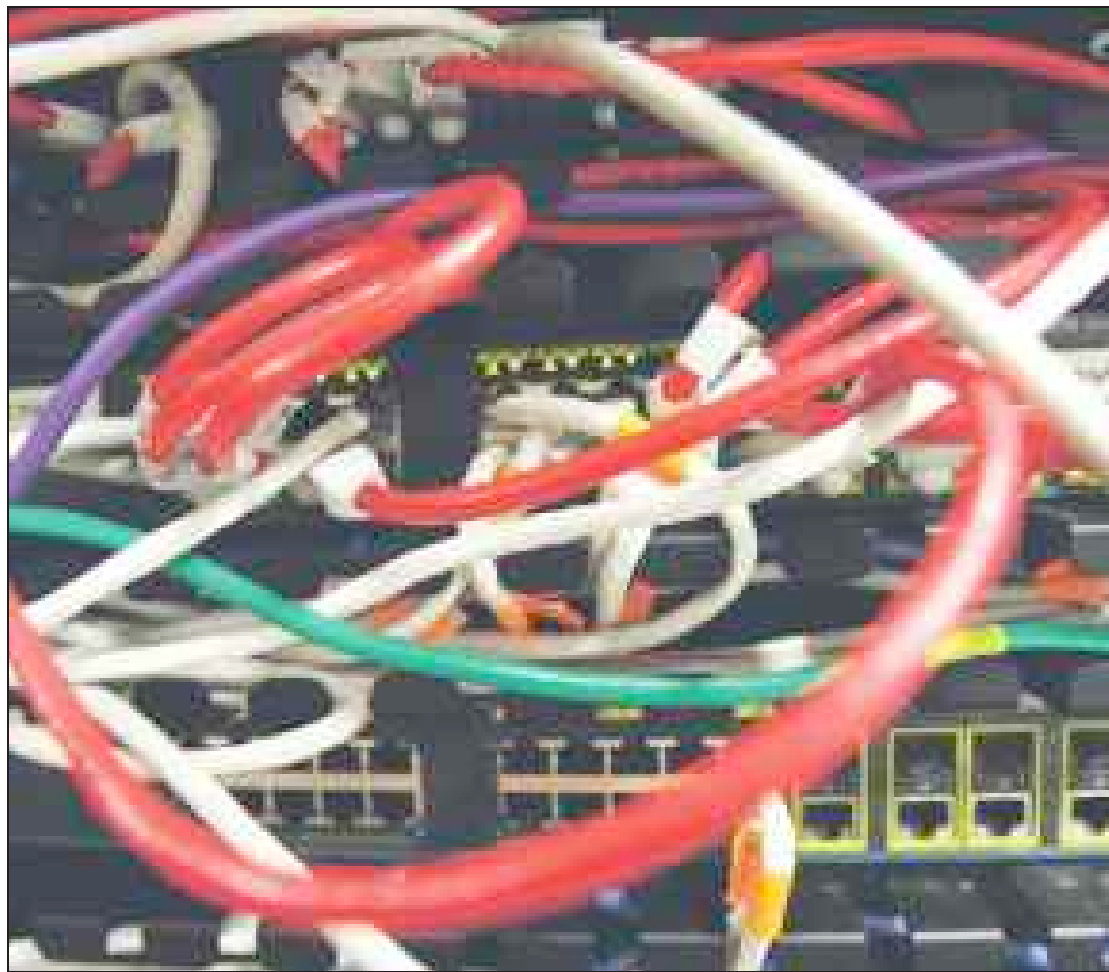
Craig Gamble
FAST LIVING



If it had been announced in early April, I might have thought it was a joke. In the middle of October the Finnish Government passed a law that made broadband internet access a legal right. That's right, they're not aiming for a mere national broadband plan, but passing into law the legal right of all 5.3 million Finnish citizens to have broadband access. Finland is the first country in the world to make this move, and is one of the most connected countries today with over 96 per cent of its population already online. The Finnish Communications Minister, Suvi Lindén, has said the move was necessary to ensure broadband internet access for people in some of the remoter rural areas of Finland.

The Finish move is rather at odds with the plans for our own National Broadband Network. It was revealed recently that, if Telstra sells off its copper network to a Government-owned NBN company, some rural customers may not be covered any more by service obligations formerly imposed on Telstra.

As governments worldwide recognise the importance of broadband access, both to stimulate the economy and to boost quality of life, the question of how to reach those without is coming to the fore. In Britain, moves are more focused on getting those who have never gone online to give it a try. There are over 10 million people in Britain who fall into this category and they don't all simply live in out-of-the-way places. Many are denied access because they can't afford it or have not been exposed to computers enough to be willing to give the internet a try. Britain's spokeswoman for these people is Martha Lane Fox, who sees the internet as a way to enrich people's lives economically, as well as (contrary to popular opinion) to



connect people and increase feelings of being part of a community. It's time to throw away ideas of virtual communities being less important than real-life ones; the two are not mutually exclusive and can build on and enrich each other.

In the United States, the broadband issue is even more thorny, and the debate there could have ramifications for many countries. To some extent, the US doesn't really have broadband. At the beginning of last year, Wall Street technology journalist Walt Mossberg said US companies should stop even using the word "broadband" to describe their internet offerings, as their speeds compared so poorly. A new study in August this year by the Communications Workers of America shows that things have not

improved much, with the US ranking very low on the average broadband speeds scale. Average US speeds of 5.1 mbps compare to the top-ranking in South Korea of 20.4 mbps. Australia fares even worse: the latest data I can find has us around the 2 mbps mark (though this may have improved recently). Not surprisingly, there are many calls afoot in the US to implement a national broadband plan.

But a bigger issue in the US than concern about broadband speed is "net neutrality". Simply put, this is the idea that everyone should be able to access the same internet speeds. Internet service providers (ISPs) have the capacity to block legal content or alter the delivery speed of that content based on who owns it. ISPs of course view both these activities

as potential money makers, but the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has begun to put together some rules to prevent such activity. Imagine the competitive edge gained by a big online company being able to pay an ISP to get better delivery speeds for their website than a competitor's, so their customers could access their site faster than others. It could also give rise to a situation where smaller companies, perhaps ones just starting out, can't afford to pay as much to the ISP for their access speed and so could never gain a foothold. It might seem then that laws against this sort of discrimination are a good thing, but the powers that be in the FCC don't see it as so clear-cut. One suggestion is to retain a "reasonable" amount of network development and adjustments by the ISPs, including "throttling" (slowing or speeding access), as long as it's done in a way that everyone can see, so potential discrimination can be spotted and stamped out. Others in the US have opposed any sort of government inference, suggesting the internet should be left to get on as it has always done, developing with competition and innovation relatively unchecked. Still others fear that not allowing ISPs to make some money from big internet companies will mean that internet charges to Joe Public will inevitably rise, as the costs are passed back down the line. As usual, if laws controlling access to the internet are passed in the US, there are likely to be knock-on effects around the world, as the internet giants based in the US react to a new environment.

Whatever happens there, it's more and more vital we sort out our own access issues and as quickly as possible. We don't want to be left out of a growing digital economy, but perhaps more importantly, we don't want the development of our digital economy to be dictated by what happens overseas. Let's sort it out, before someone else takes it away.

MAKING CONNECTIONS: Broadband internet issues – such as speed and access – are vital to the development of our digital economy.

gamblecr@gmail.com

Savouring the many and varied treats of a cinematic smorgasbord

SLOW LIVING



Can it be argued that cinema is "slow" while TV is "fast"? Though TV dinners may have disappeared, pizza and hormone-enhanced chicken-salted chooks are increasingly munched in front of the telly. However, loud chewing, slurping and cries of "pass us the Coke" don't aid concentration. TV and fast food do go hand in hand.

Cinema, like fine dining, is a slower pleasure altogether. First there is the effort to get there – it doesn't simply pour forth from your

screen. Then, in the dark, we give ourselves up to the loving embrace of the dream screen, provider of uninterrupted intellectual and aesthetic pleasure, and of course Hollywood blockbusters.

So where might film festivals fit into this scenario – surely they're a slow project? A quick glance at the Canberra International Film Festival program reveals much rich and complex fodder for the eyes and ears: a veritable smorgasbord of cinematic pleasure which veers among the obscure, the documentary, world cinema and Hollywood offerings. Is this the food court of film, where we wander from session to session enjoying disparate pleasures? Worse yet, is it a smorgasbord? Surely we

can't compare a thoughtful selection of films with that "all you can eat" mentality which we know as "the buffet option"? Yet isn't that precisely the joy of the film festival? Stuffing yourself full to the eyeballs with all you can watch?

The buffet is easy enough to negotiate but there is usually a bottleneck by the prawn platter. So it is with festivals with the juiciest film shown on a sold-out opening or closing night. Thus the latest Coen brothers' film will create a bottleneck leading to some disappointment.

A quick run through the program revealed some tasty titbits. I was drawn to the Bolivian/Japanese produced *Pachamama*, but then I'm a sucker for "ethnographic road trip"



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films. Then my eye caught *Dead Snow* and who can resist a film described as "mad and blood-stained as a meat-axe" and a "hilarious splatter-romp"?

So, to conclude in the random excessive spirit of the buffet, you might consider a side order of documentary washed down with a little something from The National Film and Sound Archive. My pick would be *Fran*, that poignant 1985 drama of the everyday. An introduction by star Noni Hazlehurst? Definitely the icing on the cake.

Dr Felicity Newman is a member of the Centre for Everyday Life at Murdoch University