

Red lights flash on Net results

Craig Gamble
FAST LIVING



Way back when Rowan Atkinson was still funny, he did a skit on the British gag show *Not the Nine O'Clock News*. In it he played a person who was deaf, and the narrator pointed out a serious problem for Atkinson's character: when the phone rang, he couldn't hear the ring. The solution was obvious, if a little overdone – attach a large flashing red light to the top of the phone, then when the phone rings, easy to notice.

The punch line is so inevitable it makes you feel silly when you don't see it coming. Atkinson sees the phone ring, goes over and picks it up, says "hello" and then of course, he can't hear a thing. OK, so you had to be there.

Is this a metaphor for where governments are stuck in our brave new digital world? They need to support new flashy technology (the big red light), but seem doomed to make futile decisions and actions (the light works, but is useless) because their hands are tied by, well, themselves. Governments are, more and more, caught in an unenviable position. On the one hand, they are actively promoting a new digital economy and the benefits it can bring. On the other, they are having to spend a great deal of time placating those in older media, such as record and film companies, who see in the digital economy's growth a loss of their established revenue streams. And at the same time governments are trying to protect us from the nastiness out there on the web, such as child pornography, or even spam email.

There couldn't be a clearer example than the Australian Government's broadband plan. It's big: \$43 billion over the next eight



years to create a broadband network that should give many of us speeds of up to 100 megabits per second, and will do a lot to move Australia into the higher echelons of broadband usage worldwide. Broadband at this sort of speed will make things such as streaming movies, music and other media a great deal faster and more appealing. It will also, the Government must be hoping, spur a digital economy that will hopefully provide a boost to the economy in general. The problem is, those very speeds at the heart of the scheme's reason for being are under threat by another government initiative: the internet filtering announced a year ago. The original aim of the filtering scheme – to prevent the proliferation of child pornography on the Net –

may be highly commendable, but the scheme itself is totally nuts, even more nuts than a big red light on the telephone for deaf users. There are two reasons. One is that it is impractical and impossible to achieve the sort of filtering the Government is talking about. Yes, you can spend the money and compel the internet service providers to implement it, but (as some have recently demonstrated) it will take many people about 2.9 nanoseconds to get around such a scheme, using such things as a proxy site. The other reason is that filtering will almost certainly erode the speed of the internet, which the Government is so lavishly trying to bump up.

The Pirate Bay trial is part of the same unappealing scenario for

Hearing distance: Rowan Atkinson turns a deaf ear to something else – for a wrong route on the information superhighway.

governments. The verdict handed down last week was shocking.

The four main people behind the file-sharing site were fined \$US3.5 million (\$A4.9 million) in damages and handed prison sentences. They were found guilty not of illegally sharing copyrighted material, but of helping to distribute it. I can't see the logic in this: if Pirate Bay, then why not Google? (It's almost as easy to find a bit torrent file of a new movie, for example, using Google as Pirate Bay.) The founders have vowed to fight the verdict, but their belligerent attitude has not done them any favours.

Governments are obliged to support the law and protect us from the criminal element, of which the Pirate Bay people have now become part. They are also subject to the pressure exerted on them by big business, and there are some pretty powerful lobby groups in the film and music industries who view file-sharing as theft.

Prosecuting the Pirate Bay founders will not reduce the number of illegal file shares by anything but the tiniest amount. Just like the Australian Government's attempts at internet filtering, there are simply too many workarounds available.

Certainly the Government should be at the forefront of promoting and facilitating a digital economy if they don't want Australia to become a technology backwater, but it has to be realistic about how this will function. It would make more sense for it to encourage music and film companies to embrace the new technologies as a way of distributing their products. It would even make sense for the Government to organise a licence fee for internet download use, a percentage of which was passed back to the companies and artists. It could also promote educated use of the internet by parents and caregivers – responsibility for sensible internet use should begin in the home. What I hope governments don't do is simply throw lots of money at a seemingly obvious solution, like a big flashing light for a phone, and then rapidly realise how useless that is. Let's hope they can see the punch line coming.

Waiting in wings for slow goodbye laced with uncertainty

SLOW LIVING



A. died last June, but I've yet to grasp it. She was in a city on the other side of the world, surrounded by loved ones who held her hands and stroked her forehead, and one of whom wrote the emails. I received them seemingly weeks out of time, like posted letters that might have travelled on ships.

It took me days to digest each one, and each one held mysteries between its short lines. So along with a slow death went a slow goodbye, laced with uncertainty – was it really

goodbye, and even if it was, could it be stated openly as such? I never knew what to reply – was A. trying to live, preparing for death, or too sick to do either? Was she still reading her email?

So I said goodbye to A. with a handwritten letter, a pair of knitted bedsocks, some music CDs and a packet of TimTams – those coveted Australian biscuits, which, it goes to show, really can suit any occasion. I told her I loved her and remembered our times together, on paper that she could hold in her hand, whether she could still read or not. When I heard she was "gone", I took a poem to the harbour and watched it float down, the ink blurring, the edges uncurling. My grandmother died slowly too.

Back in the days when flying interstate was a big thing, even when Mum and Dad paid. I saw her near the end, though – language was turning upside-down in her brain; she called me her favourite grandson and asked where her floors were – she wanted to put them on because her feet were getting cold. When her fingers became cold too, the nursing staff let us know time was short.

The last time I saw her I held her cold hand and talked as though she could hear me. Her eyes were closed, her face thin, and her bright, white hair flowed upwards. Her piled-high sewing room had been an arsenal, her ancient peach tree a monument and her laundry a museum of hard labour.



Although I've known the facts for months now, grief only visits softly

A. was a strong woman too, seen through fragments of my language and hers exchanged in the kitchen over coffee or schnapps, and in the book-lined room where she'd write philosophy sitting cross-legged on her chair. Soon I will visit her house again; and although I've known the facts for months now, grief only visits softly. For despite instantaneous technologies, the immediacy of hearing what's happening somewhere else, it will only be when there is just one person standing at the door to greet me, and not two, that I will really know she's gone.

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