

# For top broadband policy, look no further than Canada

August 20 2014, by Robert Imre

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The Great White North is about as similar to Australia as any other country ... so why don't we follow their lead? Winston Wong/Flickr, CC BY-NC-SA

You might have seen communications minister Malcolm Turnbull raising the issue about Australian press not discussing policy problems and solutions from overseas, in a [speech](#) delivered at the Lowy Institute Media Awards last week:

*The Australian media rarely reports how different countries have approached what are usually shared and very familiar issues that are topical in our own country, even if the issue is dominating the news.*

So let's do this with a project close to Mr Turnbull's heart – the National Broadband Network (NBN) – and see how other countries have dealt with technology policy, rapid development of the internet, access to good internet in rural and regional areas and so on.

For reasons we'll go into below, [Canada's broadband project](#) is a pretty good model for our NBN.

## **We're not alone**

Spending time in most European cities, even the small- to medium-sized ones, it becomes apparent that local councils have set up some excellent [internet access](#) points, to the point where almost entire city centres have free Wi-Fi access readily available. This happens in other parts of the world too, such as Singapore and South Korea.

In Australia, though, we often hear typically insular [excuses](#) such as "we don't have the population density" or "distances are too great to achieve what other countries have achieved" or "we don't have the market size in Australia" to set up high-speed, high-volume internet access.

One place that is light-years ahead of Australia is Canada – and the difference between us and them is smart government policy.

Canada has some very similar demographics and challenges to Australia:

- Canada is typically regarded as the second largest country by [land mass](#) (just under 10 million km<sup>2</sup>) after Russia, with Australia coming in at sixth at just over 7.5 million km<sup>2</sup>

- populations of both countries are concentrated in the main cities, and just as Australia's population is mostly on the coast, most of Canada's population is close to the US border
- there's lots of difficult, if not inhospitable, territory, with Australia's deserts and Canada's northern areas, and great distances to cover between some of the major population centres that need to be serviced for internet access.

At least we know that Australia is not alone in facing similar challenges.

## Europe's more like the US

Comparing individual European countries might be helpful to some extent, but in terms of telecommunications they usually function in a context that is probably more similar to the US.

Both the US and the EU function with separate political entities, being states in the US and separate nations with linking agreements in the EU. If we count the US continental land mass at just over 9.5 million km<sup>2</sup>, roughly the same as China, and the European sub-continent going east to the Urals and south-east to Istanbul, then we have roughly the same land mass.

Populations differ greatly with Canada at just under [35 million](#) inhabitants, the US at [320 million](#) and Europe (depending on how we count the countries involved) anywhere from 350 million to close to [740 million](#).

In this context, it has been difficult to make national telecommunications policies uniform in the US and Europe, and there is a vast market that dictates internet usage that we do not have in Australia. As such, comparisons with the US and Europe might not be helpful unless we look for specific examples to see how and why specific problems might

be solved.

So when most countries in Europe, from Hungary and the Czech Republic, France and Germany, to recently the UK, decide to tear up copper wire and replace it with fibre optic cables, then this is done under different circumstances with different policy and market dynamics at play.

## **Fibre optics and Wi-Fi as standard**

But Canada saw the light, as it were, 15 years ago and today has superior fibre optic deliveries that are cheaper, packaged with cable TV options, and much more readily accessible high-speed internet.

Cities such as Wellington in New Zealand do the same: near universal free Wi-Fi access in public spaces facilitates usage of the communication technology.

In Australia, Perth is an early adopter of similar such technology. This is a notoriously difficult issue to negotiate as other articles on The Conversation attest, but one that will need to be addressed more satisfactorily as mobile connection factors more importantly in the needs and expectations of, say, tourists accustomed to such connectivity.

Tourists to Japan will find that they are able to obtain access information on arrival which will then allow them to connect to free Wi-Fi in many public places frequented by tourists. A public/private partnership between the Japanese government and telecommunication companies allows for this to occur.

The major difference in policy here is an obvious one. The unreconstructed consumer-pays logic is highly detrimental to the way that any form of internet access can be built.

Throughout Europe and Canada, and some parts of the US, typical internet access plans involves unlimited downloads, or at least such high levels of downloads that small business would have no issues with reliance on their internet providers.

Never mind copper wires slowing down or completely stopping access with the presence of [heavy rain](#) (this includes big cities in Australia, so we're not talking about rare torrential downpours).

Average connections speeds are faster too. Australians have an average connection speed of [6.0Mbps](#) (although many users will know of the frustrating drop in speed whenever it rains and floods the copper wiring), while Canada and the US have average connection speeds of 9.7Mbps and 10.5Mbps respectively.

According to the [Akamai State of the Internet Report](#) for the first quarter of 2014, Australia has slipped to 42nd place in terms of average internet speed (from 40th in 2013) while forward-thinking neighbours in Asia see average speeds well above Australia's—South Korea leads the world with an average speed of 23.6Mbps.

## **User pays**

One place in which Australia is doing well comparatively is with mobile data. But this leads us to the point that individualised adoption of long-term evolution (LTE)-enabled devices and faster data is ensured for those willing to pay for it, rather than being rolled out across the network as a minimum workable standard.

Internet usage is a complex amalgam of market forces, different technologies merging to bring data uploads and downloads from various points across the globe.

In some cases there are conglomerates dictating internet usage, and in some cases the success of [internet usage](#) has been the result of smart policy choices. The radical ideological position of the current government is really about making sure that internet access of all kinds is a product or commodity, rather than a basic utility.

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