

## **The New Zealand Internet Project: marrying a global survey with local funding**

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### **Marrying Global and Local**

The New Zealand Internet Project (WIPNZ: [www.wipnz.aut.ac.nz](http://www.wipnz.aut.ac.nz)) research programme is the local arm of the World Internet Project (WIP). This report on the research programme indicates some of its major phases and draws attention to the issues of carrying out global/local research and securing institutional backing and local funding in order to carry out a longitudinal survey programme that can track changes over time. In addition, it identifies other concerns that the research team has faced, including methodological matters, staff turnover and wider responsibilities of a research programme such as keeping track of other studies on the Internet in NZ.

There are several advantages in building a local project as the local extension of an international one. There is access to an already-designed and conceptualised methodology and questionnaire and the facility to make cross-comparisons with other national studies which enables the data to immediately feed into analyses of international patterns. However, sustainable development of the programme through fitting it to local exigencies is more problematic. For example, finding local funding to order, and maintaining this over time is not always easy, appropriate links with local 'allies' have to be forged and maintained and there can be misfits between international and local research interests which must be fitted into the narrow window offered by respondent attention during the fieldwork interviews.

### **WIP internationally**

The World Internet Project (<http://www.worldinternetproject.net/>) was founded by the USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future (formerly the UCLA Center for Communication Policy) in the United States in 1999, and now has more than 30 partners in countries and regions all over the world, including Singapore, Italy, China, Japan, Macao, South Korea, Sweden, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, Hungary,

Canada, Chile, Argentina, Portugal, Australia, Bolivia, Iran and the Czech Republic. The project is based at universities and research institutes, which conduct semi-independent surveys based on a required common core of questions, together with appropriate contextual content from each jurisdiction. This process results in the accumulation of data into an international dataset, and thus generates some international publications as well as facilitating international dialogue and debate at the annual conferences.

The WIP project is founded on the belief that the Internet (in whatever form) will transform our social, political and economic lives, perhaps even dwarfing the effects of TV (often seen as the most important cultural influence of the past 50 years) and will introduce change of a similar scale to the industrial revolution or the printing press. Thus, the Internet Project is designed to get in on the ground floor of that change and watch and document what happens as households and nations acquire and extend their use of the Internet.

### **Securing Resources**

The platform for the WIPNZ was laid in a previous AUT/Unitec team project on TV Violence in New Zealand which was carried out over the 2003-2006 period (King et al., 2003). The experience of teamwork and the winning of an AUT VC's research award for team research set a platform for further collaborative work (with the \$5000 prize money being 'invested' in the 'continuing' programme). Philippa Smith, who was the project co-ordinator of the TV Violence project, was asked to stay on as the project manager to seek appropriate externally funded research projects. In mid-2005 she found reference to the WIP through Internet searching and contacted its director, Professor Jeff Cole, asking for the AUT research institute (then the Centre for Communication Research -CCR and later the Institute of Culture, Discourse and Communication -ICDC) to become recognised as the NZ arm of the project. This request was accepted.

Involvement in the WIP, however required ongoing funding to be acquired by the individual country research institutions, and this was not an easy task. In January 2006 there was a meeting with the InternetNZ's

executive at that time, Keith Davidson, who expressed great interest in the WIP, and gave the promise of a contribution towards funding as well as assistance in networking with potential funders. Internet New Zealand is a non-profit open membership organisation dedicated to protecting and promoting the Internet in New Zealand and fostering a coordinated, cooperative approach to its ongoing development. Jeff Cole visited CCR in May 2006 as a Visiting Fellow, to help publicise the project and to seek out funders. He gave two presentations in Auckland and one in Wellington, which InternetNZ hosted, and helped establish contact with the National Library who became the eventual principal funder.

In July 2006, a successful application was made for a grant from the International Science and Technology linkages fund (administered by the Royal Society of NZ) for Philippa Smith to attend the Beijing WIP international partners' meeting where she presented NZ's current situation regarding the Internet. She also spoke with a number of WIP partners regarding their systems for funding and overall handling of the survey. Applications were prepared to the Digital Strategy's Community Partnership Fund on two separate occasions during 2006, but these were unsuccessful as the WIP was not considered to be a community-based project. However, through the applications and the visits by Jeff Cole, the WIP became more widely known amongst those with an interest in the Internet.

A small (n=100) pilot study was funded (\$10,000) in mid-2006 (and carried out in late 2006) through an AUT Faculty of the Applied Humanities contestable fund grant. This study allowed testing-out of operations and development of NZ specific questions and more importantly provided a demonstration project for potential sponsors/funders. The findings of the pilot project were presented in Wellington to a group of interested parties – mostly from government ministries – at a meeting hosted by the National Library. Five members of the research team attended the WIP international partners' meeting in Melbourne (partly because it was so close at hand) in 2007, where the pilot study results were presented (Bell, 2007).

The survey investigates Internet access and targets Internet users as well as non-users; who uses this technology and what they do online. It

also considers off-line activities such as how much time is spent with friends and family. Other questions address the effects of the Internet on language use; social, cultural and educational development and the role of the Internet in accessing information or purchasing products. In addition to studying the impact of the Internet, the survey tracks the effectiveness of strategies to address issues such as the digital divide between rich and poor; urban and rural.

The WIPNZ was fully implemented in 2007. Funding was obtained in late 2006 from Internet NZ (\$25,000 p.a. for the next 3 years) and National Library (a grant of \$150,000 for each survey allocated over each two year cycle) to allow the full survey of 1530 respondents to be carried out in mid/late 2007 by Phoenix Research. Preliminary reports on the data, following presentations in Auckland and Wellington, were published in late 2007, followed in early 2008 by a final release after re-weighting of the data by statisticians at COMPASS (the University of Auckland's Social Research center). The full report of the 2007 findings was released in July 2008 at launch events in both Auckland and Wellington, as well as at the Netsafe Conference in Queenstown, to where Jeff Cole had flown in to be the keynote speaker (Bell et al., 2008a). (Netsafe is an independent non-profit organisation which aims to provide cyber safety, security and citizenry information for all of New Zealand by providing a range of tools to help keep one safer online.) A great deal of media publicity resulted from this launch, including TV, radio and newspaper coverage in all major daily newspapers and online news providers. Progress on the New Zealand study was reported to the World meeting in Budapest (Kripalani, 2008).

### **Second survey round**

An early task in 2008 was the delivery of presentations to a wide variety of audiences with the attention of garnering wider interest and support: including a Webinar delivered in conjunction with PRINZ (Public Relations Institute of NZ) and a presentation to the Department of Internal Affairs Community Net Aotearoa Advisory Group. A paper was presented on generational differences in Internet use at the international AoIR (Association of Internet Researchers) conference in Copenhagen

(Sherman et al., 2008), while a conference paper concerning the theorisation of the project was presented at SAANZ (Crothers & Smith, 2008). The WIPNZ findings were presented to a number of corporate groups, as part of efforts towards seeking further sponsorship - presentations included to Saatchi & Saatchi, Porter Novelli, Vodafone, Farmside Ltd and Temple Investment Ltd.

In late 2008 the collated results of the international project were published with a NZ version (Bell et al., 2008b). The International Highlights Report was launched with events in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch (with the Christchurch event sponsored by Bay Communications Ltd: Bell et al., 2008c). In early 2009, the team co-authored a book chapter for the WIP book project *World Wide Internet: Changing Societies, Economies and Cultures* (Goodwin et al., 2009). This chapter extends the article published in a special issue of a relevant Portuguese journal (Smith et al., 2008).

In early 2009, questionnaire re-design and sampling was carried out to enable a second (partly longitudinal) wave of data-collection of a sample of 1250, to be accomplished by Phoenix Research in late 2009. The team was represented at the 2009 Macau WIP gathering with a presentation concerning the overall WIP project, and particularly methodological issues (Smith 2009a). (A presentation at the 2010 World gathering in Lisbon mainly featured lessons to be gleaned from reflection on the progress of the New Zealand project: Crothers, 2010).

Another wave of consultation with stakeholders saw presentation of findings to TelstraClear, Yahoo!Xtra, Microsoft and Vodafone. Additionally, a number of government departments were contacted. Correspondence from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Economic Development and the Minister of Information and Communication Technology assisted with the development of the 2009 questionnaire and the formation of a new study, the Internet & Society Panel Project (ISPP).

In March 2010, the WIPNZ 2009 Report (Smith, et al., 2010) was successfully launched at events in Auckland and Wellington. In Wellington a good sized government-focused audience engaged strongly with the presentation, with a number of useful discussions including

potential research collaborations, occurring afterwards. In Auckland, a similarly full audience focussed more on the business sector who attended, with good engagement and interest from a range of parties. The presentation included the first comparisons between the 2007 and 2009 rounds of the WIPNZ survey. A Comparative Report was then completed reporting on trends observed across the two rounds of the WIPNZ completed in 2007-2009 (Bell et al., 2010).

### **ISPP Study**

The Internet and Society Panel Project (ISPP) is a stand-alone project which complements the surveys of WIPNZ. The subsidiary ISPP study focuses on the impact of the Internet and social change. Additional consultation with Internet marketing and social media experts was facilitated by David Fougere of Phoenix Research. In late 2009, a questionnaire was developed for the ISPP for use with an Internet-based panel. Contestable AUT faculty funding (\$5000) was obtained to carry out this study in a combined arrangement with Phoenix Research. The survey was implemented in February 2010. The findings from the WIPNZ (Billot & Crothers, 2010) have identified some ways in which society is changing in relation to the use of the Internet in New Zealand. The ISPP aims to focus on these issues by providing current topical data in a shorter timeframe through sequential on-line surveys of topics examining specific issues in depth. The first survey round focused on social networking and its effects on individuals. However, given a limited response rate there is some doubt that further rounds will eventuate, also given limited available funding.

Key topics examined in the first round of the Internet & Society Panel included:

- What are the factors shaping participation in social media?
- How much do people trust social media?
- What are the developing norms of social media usage?
- What is the relationship between social media and social competence?
- How is identity constructed through the use of social media?
- What effect(s) does have on quality of life?
- Why are some internet users not using social media?

### **Conclusions**

As with any collaborative research endeavour there are tensions and challenges that sit alongside the positive outcomes. The project has shown itself to be worthy of support. The Internet is having a significant effect on society and its development and the WIPNZ provides the nation with an insight into how Internet use is transforming societal structure and characteristic at significant speed. WIPNZ has been fortunate to secure a solid ongoing source of funding, but that funding does not keep pace with increasing expenses. In addition, the past two years of recession have inhibited further sponsorship, as expressed by interested parties. Much effort has been expended on unsuccessfully tracking down extra financial support and in successfully shoring up existing financial support. Considerable care has been taken to ensure that the publications have a high quality of presentation, and emphasis is laid on graphic portrayal of results so that there is wide public (and journalistic) understanding of the results.

There have been some challenges with team cohesion as team members leave and move away and this has implications for the retention of project knowledge. A successful research team needs to be able to draw on complementary skills (including quantitative skills since this programme largely relies on quantitative survey data) and knowledge to maintain project momentum. This factor also impacts on the nature of academic publications. While reporting takes up much time and a number of presentations have been given, there has been less time to complete academic papers.

Methodological issues are also a challenge as the Internet environment alters with speed and this means that the WIPNZ is pressured to keep up with the changing technology. The survey questions need constant revision and there is the added issue of optional questionnaire completion modes. Previous surveys have used telephone interviewing but this is put at risk because of falling rates of landline connection as many people increasingly rely on mobiles and (for the 85% or more households which remain connected) large difficulties in obtaining sampling lists of phone numbers. Although non-phone users are almost certainly likely to be non-Internet users nevertheless their voice is missing in the survey. Given the high cost of interviewing online modes

now need to be explored. Internationally, these issues remain of concern. Another three methodological issues are quite technical: one is how to blend 'booster samples' (needed to ensure adequate representation of youth and minority ethnic sub-populations), another how to work with over-time data which is partly two-wave and partly one-wave, and yet another how to best exploit the interesting possibilities opened up by inclusion in the design of parent-child pairs of interviews.

The domination of the questionnaire by internationally-shared questions has presented some issues, although the NZ team has been active in discussion of common questions and ensuring their methodological adequacy. However, representation at these meetings can be a costly extra to the programme. New Zealand-specific questions have been added to the questionnaires and cover particular issues concerning local ethnicities and languages and policy concerns.

To be seen as a 'centre of research excellence' on the Internet, effort has had to be made to review other New Zealand studies (e.g. review by Smith, 2009, of a major book tracing the history of Internet development in New Zealand: see also extensive references in Goodwin et al., 2009) and keep abreast of general e-infrastructure developments in New Zealand etc. There are also responsibilities to the Internet research sector, such as attending a 2010 workshop (hosted by Ministry of Economic Development) focusing on the statistical domain of the Internet.

One imponderable which stalks thinking about this programme of research is how long it might continue. Already it was late in studying Internet usage which had widespread adoption before the first wave of the study. Perhaps as the diffusion curve 'plateaus out' there is still a need for ongoing (but perhaps less frequent) monitoring of social effects as its uses change, although the Internet and its related technologies continue to morph so rapidly this may be too simplistic a picture. In the meantime there are many research questions begging to be answered using the WIPNZ data, and to further guide our thinking on research issues we were able to include 'respondents' views on research concerns in the ISP study. Such feedback from participants enables the team to reflect on survey content and implementation and retain both currency and

participant appeal. The WIPNZ team remain committed to pursue this research on the social impact of Internet use and believe that the study offers a significant contribution to understanding the effect of the Internet in New Zealand.

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