

The Pacific digital future

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Led by bloggers, digital entrepreneurs and social media groups in Papua New Guinea, a Pacific 'digital generation' is emerging that is increasingly influencing public debates, forming policy ideas, holding institutions accountable and coordinating political protests.

The potential size and influence of the Pacific's emerging 'digital generation' is enhanced by the fact that more than 50 per cent of the regional population is estimated to be below the age of 24.

In a new Lowy Institute research paper launched last week, *Digital Islands: How the Pacific's ICT Revolution is Transforming the Region*, I outline how the Pacific Islands region is in the midst of a digital revolution that could have profound implications for the region's governance and development.

My research, sponsored by the Myer Foundation Melanesia program at the Lowy Institute, reveals that digital technologies are increasingly being used in the Pacific Islands to harness, influence and project political and social change.

About 60 per cent of Pacific Islanders now have access to a mobile phone and this figure continues to climb. This has coincided and fused with another global phenomenon, the rise of social media.

Telecommunications deregulation and greater competition has led to a mobile phone explosion in the region. For example, in 2007 there were only 160,000 mobile phone subscriptions in Papua New Guinea.

Today, that figure is approaching 2.5 million subscriptions; dispersed across seven million people, meaning that more than one in three Papua New Guineans have access to a mobile phone. Five years ago, only one in 20 people in PNG had mobile phone access.

In Tonga, mobile phone penetration has risen from only three percent in 2002 to 53 percent of Tonga's population in 2011. Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu and New Caledonia now enjoy mobile penetration rates of over 80 per cent - meaning that more than eight out of 10 people in these countries have access to a mobile phone.

Some Pacific Islanders own multiple mobile phone SIM cards to take advantage of the day's cheapest call and SMS text deals. Others have one mobile phone between a family or community, sharing it around to arrange transportation, check on the day's market prices or stay in touch with loved ones.

The mobile growth statistics are impressive, but the region is home to some of the lowest internet rates in the world. For example, only two per cent of PNG's population had access to the internet in 2011 and in Solomon Islands, Samoa and Vanuatu, it is less than 10 per cent.

However, web-enabled mobile phones and Facebook phones are enabling the region to leapfrog barriers to computer-enabled Internet access, such as high-cost, remoteness, and availability. Decreasing prices for mobile phones and for mobile calls, and improving reception, has facilitated more widespread access, far beyond wealthy city residents.

There are now almost 700,000 Facebook users in the Pacific Islands. Papua New Guinea is leading the region's growth in social media use with Facebook membership nearing 150,000, a figure which has tripled since mid-2011. Fiji and Samoa, also experiencing high growth in Facebook membership, are not far behind.

What makes the digital revolution in the Pacific particularly transformative is its potential to address the region's demographic, geographic and economic challenges. Digital technologies are helping Pacific Islanders participate in political dialogue and are improving social and development outcomes.

People in both city and rural communities are participating in debates from which they were previously excluded. Unlike radio, arguably the most important source of information for most Pacific Islanders, Facebook discussion groups and blogs provide a forum for an exchange of information and opinion where all users can participate via their mobile phones.

An excellent example of this is the PNG Facebook discussion group Sharp Talk. Over the past year, it has tackled and debated issues including domestic violence, rape, the mining sector, paid parental leave, Chinese ownership of businesses, Australia's visa system for Papua New Guineans, the costs of transferring funds through banks, gay rights and gender inequality (just to name a few). This site has been successful for two key reasons. First, growth in Facebook users in Papua New Guinea has taken this site from a small discussion group to the centre of debate for young Papua New Guineans and emerging leaders. The second reason for Sharp Talk's success is the proactive regulation of the group by its small group of administrators.

They encourage inclusiveness, assist in informing debate, discourage and punish cyber-bullying (you can be banned from the site). Despite these rules, the site remains informal at heart and is used to brainstorm ideas and test opinion.

In Solomon Islands, the Facebook group, Forum Solomon Islands International (FSII), which is now a registered NGO, has focused media attention on the poor health services at a Honiara hospital.

FSII, which has almost 3000 members, has used Facebook to encourage members to meet up and volunteer two days of their time to renovate the children's ward, in addition to raising and collecting funds for the hospital. FSII identifies as a group of concerned Solomon Islands citizens who are willing and voluntarily share constructive contributions to combat corruption and improve well-being in the country'.

Currently, FSII is planning the launch of their strategy document.