

## **Multilingual Community Web Publishing**

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### **Introduction**

In the field of community multilingual web publishing, technical advances have been made in recent years. In the light of experience such as that shown by Vicnet's community web publishing experience, what is the potential for the implementation of these technologies?

In an ideal vision of a successful community multilingual web publishing program, there should be an environment where communities are able to interact with, participate in and contribute to online services delivered across a diverse range of technological platforms, and in a wide range of languages. This should be conducted using standard computer operating systems available in Victoria. What do we need to do to implement this vision?

### **Background**

In the dawn of community web publishing, community hosts (such as the Seattle Community Network and Vicnet - both initiated in 1994) and commercial online entities (such as GeoCities, and Angelfire - both advertising supported systems) provided the first platforms for community organisations to realise their online publications.

It is Vicnet's experience that enthusiasm within the community sector provided a significant demand for free web hosting services, and in the words of Vicnet's founder, "we had cornered the free end of the market". This service experiences a demand of around 400 new applications for this service per year, with over 4,500 current users. Around 75% of these organisations do successfully publish their content and usually this is done with the organisations own capability. Many however, do not continue to update their content, and a familiar story to us at Vicnet is that of a group who has forgotten their site.

Community organisations choose the Vicnet free web hosting service as it provides an advertising free environment, with unlimited data traffic permissible from each site. Vicnet is also able to provide a reliable and stable technical environment, with an enduring commitment for ongoing service provision. Vicnet has a good reputation for helpful and straightforward customer service, best suited to community organisations. While the free service provides limited access to some services, some organisations opt to upgrade their web site hosting with domain registration and virtual web hosting. This service is available at a competitive price and includes additional functionality such as script hosting and support for php and perl.

## Measuring Success

Most community organisations in Vicnet's program have found the capacity for developing and uploading web sites, yet conversely they frequently lack the capacity to continue to support and maintain these systems. Essentially, at the core of this issue is the difficulty faced by many community organisations in the uptake and management of technical capability. A list of potential scenarios includes:

- failure to accept the responsibility to maintain services,
- change-over in management personnel,
- failure to ensure communication between decision makers and technical personnel (e.g. the web designer who does the work and the committee who runs the organisation),
- lack of technical expertise,
- lack of technical advice and instructions.

A number of organisations successfully embracing online technologies have moved on from Vicnet's free service to register their own domain name, either with Vicnet or via an alternate web host (e.g. COASIT and, CELAS).

The Vicnet community web publishing subscribers include an estimated 400 potential candidates for multilingual web publishing. This includes organisations representing CALD communities, and service organisations supporting those organisations.

Less than ten percent of these organisations have already published their content in community languages (e.g. Whittlesea Community Connections, Vietnamese Youth Association). These organisations typically have not accessed the most effective enabling technologies. In many cases languages such as Chinese and Arabic are published by these example organisations in the form of images. These efforts represent an acknowledgement of the requirement for multilingual publishing, but scarcely meet the demands of the community, nor do they achieve their objectives efficiently.

The ingredients for a successful web development project include three main areas:

- A focus on planning and preparation with a willingness to seek advice,
- Use of best practice technologies and methods in development, and
- Planning for the continuity and long term future of the project.

## **The Next Steps**

At this stage of our progress in this field, we acknowledge the achievements made in the provision of community web hosting, but nonetheless are conscious of the deficit in meeting the multilingual needs of the Victorian online community.

Some of the questions raised by this situation are as follows:

- Is the community sufficiently supported by community internet access in the home and at public venues?
- Is the community supported by IT literacy training through programs such as the “Multilingual Senior Surfers on the Internet”?
- Will the community support and engage in the services provided?
- Are the community web publishers provided with the technologies required to achieve efficient multilingual web publishing?
- Are these technologies supported with adequate documentation and technical assistance?
- Will the community develop and contribute content to bring the system to life?

## **Strategies for Success**

As the conditions for multilingual community web publishing in Victoria includes a number of limitations, a new approach is required to deliver the breadth of technical solutions required. We are now faced with an opportunity to meet this community demand, and it's up to us to work out how to do it.

The strategy suggested for this scenario should focus on four areas:

1. Multilingual Web Publishing Content Infrastructure
2. Multilingual Web Publishing Training
3. Multilingual Web Publishing Hosting Environment
4. Multilingual Web Publishing Support

The content infrastructure requirement consists primarily of the enablement of correct font displays for minority languages. At a community internet access venue anywhere in the State of Victoria, configuration of standard English language internet terminals with the necessary fonts for language display combined with implementation of language settings in community web sites will enable any community member to read the information they require in their own language. Software language keyboards will enable users to access additional character sets otherwise not available on standard operating systems. Configuring web pages to display the correct Unicode character sets. Vicnet has been actively working across a range of technologies for example

- With the public library network to improve the level of multilingual capability of internet access terminals at public libraries,
- Development of online keyboards for community languages such as Dinka and Nuer languages of the Southern Sudan (~naath ~agamong),
- With Australian cultural institutions to deliver MyLanguage multi-lingual resource access tool,
- Research into best practice implementation of available technologies.

The training requirement consists of a combination of introductory internet training such as Internet presentations which raise awareness of the value of the internet, and hands on internet training such as that delivered by the Multilingual Senior Surfers on the Internet program and the Skills.net Roadshow program; and also multilingual technologies training to provide the skills to web developers working in this field. Vicnet's experience in the field of introductory internet training is of an almost insatiable demand for basic internet skill development wide across the community sector.

The hosting environment must be provided which not only delivers a wide range of technical platforms for publishing, but also ensures that these are fully language capable. The number of platforms available to us has increased in recent years, and the options need to be assessed for multilingual capability. The following platforms are relevant tools for the community to access to meet their publishing needs. Each solution must be assessed for its font display capability to ensure that it will be functional in a multilingual environment.

Platform	Function
Content management systems	Rapid content deployment and maintenance of content
Blog	Automated routine reports.
Wiki	Multi-user contributory method of summarising information
Mailing list	Administration of members and automation of content distribution via email.
Threaded discussion boards	Multi-user contributory method of collecting information categorised by topic
Database management systems	Management of interaction between online and offline systems.

With the correct platforms enabled, the job for the average web developer becomes much more achievable. Vicnet's experience with its hosting system is of constant evaluation and development of new hosting options aimed at meeting client demands.

The support requirements for community organisations are considerable. Community organisations require flexibility and understanding from their support provider, along with a range of options for implementation. Documentation of step-by-step procedures is essential, along with technical guides which can provide advice to assist in decision making.

## **Conclusion**

Since 1994, the Victorian community has experienced changes in its demographics and subsequently its language groups have also experienced change. The technical demands of the community have changed. But significantly our technical capability has evolved, as evidenced through projects such as MyLanguage. We now have a range of technologies available, but the challenge is to incorporate these technologies into the capacity of our community. We propose that it is now time to implement a multilingual web publishing program for the Victorian community.