

○ TELECOMMUNICATIONS, ETHICS AND JUSTICE

A TRIBUTE TO CHRISTOPHER NEWELL (1964–2008)

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Christopher Newell, AM (1964–2008)

Professor Christopher Newell, AM, was a pioneer in the field of telecommunications and consumers. In 1989, Christopher was awarded a Master's degree from the University of Wollongong from a thesis entitled *Australian Telecommunications and Disabled People*. He promptly followed this up in 1994 with a PhD thesis from Deakin University, entitled *The Social Construction of the Wheelchair and Cochlear Implant: A Study of the Definition and Regulation of Disability*. Many papers, talks, addresses, and scholarly articles followed on topics of disability, technology, and telecommunications.

Christopher was schooled in the traditions of science and technology studies, and various other critical disciplines, not least ethics, and the new disability studies. He saw technology as socially shaped, or even socially constructed – and as a ‘socio-political space’. Like many critical scholars of technology, Christopher opened up the ‘black box’ of technology’. In our 2004 book *Digital Disability*, we offered an account of how disability was time and time again built into new digital technologies.

The implication of such arguments that Christopher put elsewhere was that people actually did have a great deal of power to determine to what ends they put technology; to how technology was designed, and implemented. Christopher especially taught us to be aware and question the great, dominant myth of technology as the salvation of people with disabilities – while real, existing people with disabilities were actually experiencing new forms of exclusion, and, most ironically, from those important new technologies in which they should have a stake.

Not content with undertaking his luminous critical and scholarly work, Christopher engaged directly and over many years in telecommunications policy, in the interests of consumers. Christopher was at the table at the most fruitful initiatives in consumer, industry, and government partnership in the past two decades, including the Telstra Consultative Council, the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman, various government policy exercises (not least the Broadband Services Expert Group), Standards Australia work, and the self-regulation represented by the Communications Alliances and its predecessor bodies.

While still relatively young, Christopher was an *éminence grise* of the consumer and disability movements. He was a central and pivotal figure in so many boards, committees and engagements in telecommunications and consumers – shaping consultative processes, standards, regulations, complaints handling, policy, and many other areas. To the everyday mundane proceedings of such organisations, Christopher reminded us, often with great humour, of the importance of activating consumer rights, of considering the ethical implications of what we do, of the vital role of governance. Christopher was deeply committed, in the most ethical and spiritual, as well as in professional, democratic, and intellectual dimensions, to conversations as constituting a truly civil society.

One of the things that most frustrated Christopher was the recurrent tendency of those who have the power to set the scene for deliberation on telecommunications policy in Australia to neglect dialogue and to forget lessons and insights (especially from the literature represented by *Telecommunications Journal of Australia*, and other indispensable chronicles). Time and time again, he observed, and spoke out against, the industry, government, regulatory, academic, and even consumer forums, in which no heed was paid to how to ensure a diversity of people could participate; that many voices could speak; that as many life experiences, desires and aspirations could figure in the envisioning of futures.

Christopher challenged the powerful to genuinely incorporate the interests of all in telecommunications policy, founding such a nationally beneficially communications environment, upon ongoing, real, and institutionalised dialogue, in which consumers were extended some modicum of resources to research, discuss, and determine their views. Christopher believed that such dialogue was especially critical in making self and co-regulation fair and effective, rather than just for lip-service and show.

When I remember him, it is vitally important to me that the quest for genuine dialogue in telecommunications not only continues, but is taken to new heights. Such conversations, and the actions that are bound up in them, are one important step to ensure that our telecommunications technology is imagined and realized with all us in mind. Christopher had a gift for such rich and potent dialogue, and for the extraordinary friendships he struck up with people across the telecommunications industry – and in all this, his example testified to the importance of relationships in all we do, even the great modern project of technology.