

Submission – Optus Network Outage

Dennis Maddock

To whom it may concern.

I wish to raise a number of points surrounding the recent Optus Network outage.

Impact on Australia's international standing

Such a significant outage with slow and limited information around the impacts, the likely restoration timeframes and the causes makes Australia look poor on the international stage in terms of reliable infrastructure, business capabilities, government capabilities and standards and services available to those living and working in Australia. The fact that Optus has still not provided detailed technical reasons for the outage is of significant concern.

Impact on transactions for personal and business reasons

There was a large impact on ordinary Australians and small and medium businesses who have all been slowly convinced over the last few years by the Australian Government, by the big banks and by the media, that cash is dirty (particularly during COVID), that less and less cash is being used, that electronic is the way to go (particularly as transactions can be tracked and the big banks get to charge fees at the point of sale, which cannot be done with cash). As a result, from the media articles, people were shocked that their plastic cards and their virtual cards on their phones did not work. They have seemed to have forgotten about cash.

The impact was also large for businesses, many of whom have decided it is a good idea to no longer accept cash. Perhaps they should review that decision in light of the recent Optus, Telstra and Commonwealth Bank outages.

The Australian Government needs to support and encourage cash, rather than support the big banks and big business in trying to get rid of it.

The role of Government and business to ensure this does not happen again

I note that since the rollout of the NBN, the old copper phone network that worked without power or internet was turned off. Perhaps there needs to be a revision of this decision. The maintenance and use of the old copper phone network would have meant landlines, and particularly hospital and public transport communication systems may have continued to work.

The Australian Government and big business should encourage all Australians to have enough cash in person and available to cover their transactions for a week. This would ensure during any future internet, power or natural disaster outages, that such a event has minimal impact upon ordinary Australians and businesses. Instead of being newsworthy, everyone would simply use cash until the systems were restored. In other words, cash should be established as a back-up plan.

Communication by Optus and Government

I believe the communication by both Optus and all levels of Government was too slow, concentrated on minimising the event rather than providing useful information and focussed on the media outlets rather than focussing on the ordinary Australian such as the working parents, the elderly and those in regional and remote areas – for whom this outage may have had the biggest impact.

Posting updates and providing information via the internet when the Optus internet is down is not useful.

Perhaps provide detailed updates to media outlets and organisations such as local councils and Australia Post outlets who can print out the information and place it on noticeboards and in public areas. Perhaps major shopping centres and similar as well. This may well see the resurgence of town criers who can read out this information in the main streets of cities and towns around Australia. Maybe as per natural disaster planning, encourage Australians to have a pocket radio with batteries so they can hear the news when the internet and their phones are not working.

Perhaps even encourage printed street directories in vehicles for when the GPS systems are down or not working.

Summary

Such an outage, significant as it was, should not have impacted Australia as much as it did. Same as for natural disasters including bushfires and floods, Australians should be encouraged to be ready and to plan for the internet and phone networks to not work all the time. To have enough cash for a week, to have a radio with batteries so they can listen to the news when their mobile phone/apps are not working. Basic planning and preparation. To have back-up systems to deliver news and information via radio, to utilise printers to print out information, as newspapers used to do, and perhaps should do again.

Next time, the power outage or internet outage may last longer. Australia needs to be less reliant upon electronics and the internet.

Thank you for your time.