

Local Connections: Making the Net Work for People and Communities

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This summary paper sets community networking in the context of current policy issues relating to digital television and looks at the need to give community networking a stronger voice nationally and globally. It warns of the danger of developing 'Voices from the Tower' in the Information Society – a metaphor for being seen but not heard – and looks at some of the responses to these issues in Europe.

Reading 'The Australian' this week I was struck by the headline 'Viewers left in the Dark'.¹ The theme of the article was that pending decisions on the nature of digital TV could leave many Australians without access to its interactive potential. Digital broadcasting it would seem is the new panacea for all our problems. It offers "much more than just a pretty picture and a choice of channels, programs and broadcasters. It could also offer services such as shopping and banking. It could be used to deliver education and health services."

Sound familiar? It was not so long ago that the Internet and Web were being heralded as the agents of change. But digital broadcasting it seems goes one step further. "It could even be a way of putting the Internet into millions of homes. The technology could give Australians the ability to interact with a media that has until now been largely a one way street. The ABC, for example, wants to be able to set up a virtual interactive noticeboard using digital technology that would let Australians in remote areas keep in touch with local events – and post their own information – using their television sets."

Conventional wisdom suggests that the decisions about to be made by the Federal Government will determine how much of that potential of digital technology is fulfilled. Time is short since the results of those decisions will be reaching peoples' lounges in little over fifteen months. Concerns are being expressed. Some say that the potential is being limited because old regulatory and commercial models are inappropriate to the technologies of today and tomorrow. Others are saying that it is the consumers and viewers who are losing out. There has been very little debate on exactly what it is that digital TV (or the Internet, for that matter) will give them.

¹ The Australian, 27.9.99, p15

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Some, like ex SBS Managing Director and now co-author of a government report on the potential of digital technology, Malcolm Long, want the Government and media industry to bring the needs of ordinary people into the digital policy equation – especially the need for all Australians, no matter where they live, to have access to the information revolution. As Long puts it,

“Presently most Australians are locked out of the information economy, and we often forget that.”²

In fact it would seem that digital TV is about to be the new medium of access. Long goes on to comment that:

“Unless that is addressed – that issue of the gap between those who are well off enough to have a computer and those who do not – then the country is not going to get the kind of lift into the post-Industrial Internet economy that everyone agrees is where our country is going to have to position itself. Digital TV isn’t just about pretty pictures or sharper pictures, or even about being able to click up statistics while you watch the cricket. It is about facilitating the digital revolution, bringing it home to the vast majority of Australians for whom it is not, still, part of their lives.”

Some are pinning their hopes in particular on the interactive dimensions. The ABC, for example, plans to develop ‘an interactive ABC that will allow rural and regional communities not only to tap into their area’s news on demand, but to have a greater ability to produce their own content as well’. This will ‘extend and empower the TV viewer, in regional areas in particular, to get much more news, information, local activity out of their TV sets in a way that would be impossible under the old analogue model.’³

Looked at from a community networking perspective, these kinds of arguments and approaches are cause for concern. The focus of debate globally is not only still technologically determined – and in the process of shifting from the ‘Net’ to the TV – but community interests and values are still largely conspicuous by their absence. The language used by Long above is instructive. He talks about bringing the ‘needs of ordinary people’ – as opposed to the ordinary people themselves – into the digital policy equation. The policy outcomes of digital TV, electronic commerce and so on are being shaped by big commercial interests with the help of national governments. In the rhetoric of the debate we are being reduced to consumers and TV viewers and offered access to information rather than an increased potential for debate and communication.

² ibid

³ ibid

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Yet from our own experiences at the local level we know that community networking is not so much about the technologies as the people. The technologies are a means to an end – not a goal in themselves. Access is about the ability to use the technologies in ways that seem relevant to peoples' everyday lives and interests. Access is not about having a pc or TV per se. The potential that technology offers people to improve their lives is less about accessing information and electronic commerce and much more about building up self-confidence, learning, being creative – and often most importantly – bring in the same place and doing things together.

ICTs in many ways are a tool for community building and for opening doors for individuals – raising their aspirations and achievements, often in contexts where previously they thought this would never be possible. Here are some examples taken from a report of local online community projects in the UK.⁴

."I was unemployed and my house was falling down. There was a tremendous lack of information. For people like me to climb out of that pit was tremendous.... All I do is give people confidence enough to have a chance in life. The Internet can be a tool to do that."

Steve Fox, MaTReC, Manor Council estate, Sheffield

"The self confidence being built here is unbelievable"

John Foster, ex-miner, Grimethorpe Electronic Village Hall, Yorkshire

"Computers are very important. They are one of the ways people can begin to engage with what they see as the cutting edge of society. Hitherto they have seen themselves as completely separate from society, so when they begin to develop skills with computers that gives them messages about their own potential...By providing a very high-quality service to people who are not used to being taken seriously, we found that people responded in a fantastic way. The outlook of the students has been transformed from one of demotivation and disempowerment to expanded horizons, optimism and motivation about what they can achieve."

Ben McCall, Liverpool Artskills

"What we're doing is helping people to find ways of meeting and connecting with each other. Putting generations in touch with each other. Building trust with

⁴ Claire Shearman (1999): Local Connections: Making the Net Work for Neighbourhood Renewal, report commissioned by Communities Online in response to the UK Government's Social Exclusion Unit's report: 'Bringing Britain Together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal'

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others in the community..... The products that are being developed (by local people) .. are valuable community assets in their own right. ... Skills are being developed which will impact on local economic regeneration, .. (these)..are not being developed in isolation, or by individuals for their own sake, but in the context of the community as a whole.”
Brian Cross, Artimedia, Batley, Yorkshire

What these people need – and what they use the technology for in many cases through, for example, digital art, reminiscence work, community newsletters, self publishing and so on – is getting themselves a voice. Not having a voice is a common theme of most types of exclusion and disadvantage. Elsewhere I have characterised this exclusion from current policy frameworks with the metaphor of ‘Voices from the Tower’.⁵ The metaphor, borrowed from a community arts group based in Cork, Ireland, reflects an image developed by members of a marginalised community to express their frustration at the reality of exclusion. Located in the peripheries and deprived neighbourhoods of our towns and cities, these communities feel that they are seen but rarely heard.

Despite rising numbers of Internet subscribers across the globe, it remains the case that for the majority of the people Information Society media from basic e-mail and Internet to interactive multimedia and associated digital technologies remain outside of their experience. When access is provided moreover, it often fails to empower these people. The user model underpinning service provision is usually that of consumer rather than developer. The underlying tenet is that resources, information and content are being developed somewhere else by somebody else.

This has grave economic as well as social implications. A predominantly mediated experience of the Information Society does not lend itself easily to the development of the kinds of creative skills and milieux necessary to generate new economic activity and growth. What it is doing is widening the gulf between those who have access to these new opportunities and those who do not. For those with skills and resources this is not a cause for concern, since they have the option to mediate for themselves should they choose to do so. For those lacking the skills and confidence however, it is the Information Society equivalent of being relocated to the ‘Tower’.

Many ‘Voices from the Tower’ are emerging in Europe’s – and no doubt Australia’s - Information Society. Many ICT projects are ‘top down’ technology towers lacking any

⁵ Claire Shearman (1998) Multimedia Europe: Content producers or ‘Voices from the Tower’ – a report on socioeconomic aspects of multimedia content development in Europe, commissioned by the European Commission, DG13

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real content input from the communities on the ground and numerous digital cities and sites lack any real neighbourhood presence. Often we can see these 'towers' - the wired schools, the training centres, the virtual shopping malls, the online information systems, the digital cities and sites - but cannot hear the voices of the individuals and communities within them. The likelihood of the 'towers' becoming permanent features of the Information Society landscape is reinforced by the fact that the community sector is being excluded from active participation in policy dialogues shaping Information Society development at the global, European, national, regional and local levels.

This, along with the policy contexts of digital TV and electronic commerce, underlines the crucial importance of people at the local level – those who have been involved in developing online activities in ways that support and promote greater real involvement and inclusion – linking together and getting themselves on the Information Society and digital policy map.

It is not coincidental I think that across the globe – from your discussions here about the formalisation of an Australian Community Networking Association to the establishment of national and/or regional community networking initiatives in the UK, Spain and Italy and the recent creation of the European Association of Community Networking – grass roots community networking activities are gaining greater visibility.

On one level community networking is coming of age – and gaining a certain confidence and track record. On another level, the persistent tendency of policymakers across the globe to promote a primarily market and technology driven model of digital opportunity is resulting in the emergence of a new – and critically more important type – of digital divide. I say more important because the as yet largely anecdotal, but nevertheless significant evidence from across the globe does suggest that the types of results that are emerging from community networking or grass roots approaches to online activities have the potential to bridge – or at least to substantially alleviate – the inequities experienced by disadvantaged groups and communities in ways that can also empower the people concerned.

In this context local is global – and we have a responsibility not only to share our experiences but also to work together to develop new social and economic models that provide viable alternatives to the failing approaches that policymakers are currently offering us. We may not have access to the level of resources and new technology development enjoyed by government administrations and commercial interests – but we do have access to what in the end are the crucial factors underpinning economic and social development locally and nationally. We have access to people, to their creativity and talent and to their social networks. If we add to this skills, we can be well placed to

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promote future growth and sustainable societies and development. But to bring about true change we need to work in partnership with others – with local businesses and public institutions – and to do this at the global and national – as well as the local level – we need to have more of a voice.

Getting this voice – putting communities on the map in our local, national and European policy debates – has been part of the incentive driving the development of national community networking associations in the UK and Spain. In Italy, historically and culturally predisposed to regional more than national identity, regional networks have been established and are beginning to link up nationally. For the past two years now we have been working to formally set up a European Association of Community Networking (e@cn)⁶ – something we finally achieved in July 1999.

So why have we set up the e@cn? For a number of reasons including:

- giving voice to community values in the shaping of the Information Society
- raising awareness of the potential of community networking to reinvigorate the democratic process
- engaging in political dialogue at the European level
- working with the private and public sectors to identify new ways of supporting local economies
- promoting global cooperation with other networks

All these processes to date have been done on a voluntary basis and have therefore taken time to develop and implement. What has kept us going I suspect is our capacity for vision and for thinking 'big'. The great thing about the technology is the scale of what you can achieve with relatively limited resources but plenty of imagination. Spurred on by the speed at which community networking is developing in Europe, we have set ourselves a goal for next year – the Global 2000 celebration – to take place at local community level across the world from February to September. The format will be that of fairs linked to events – or on their own – in which local people can showcase what they have been doing, and meet other community networkers from across the world, culminating in a major event in Barcelona. More details will be available soon – we – the e@cn - hope you will get involved – and look forward to seeing you in Barcelona, if not before!

⁶ <http://www.eacn.org>

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