Information Communications Technologies (ICTs) - to make or break community?

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In his introduction to the draft New Zealand Digital Strategy for Consultation, the Hon David Cunliffe, began by saying:

> *Our government is committed to bringing the benefits of information and communications technology (ICT) to all New Zealanders - to create a society where ICT empowers everyone to create, access, utilise and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals and communities to achieve their potential…*

In this strategy it is expected that the community will enable and support this potential to be realised. The strategy goes on to say:

> *The social and productive capabilities that already exist in a community are necessary for building confident, self reliant, self actualising communities and are crucial to the development and sustainability of ICT initiatives." (2004:59)*

Government's policies to develop community ICT point in the right direction, however to realise their potential it is necessary to carefully consider the nature of community that exists and how this can be developed. For example the policy does not specify what is meant by 'community', or what difference ICT can actually make in enabling individuals and communities achieve their potential, and what practical issues need to be addressed. Further questions of public concern include Internet safety, security issues such as financial scams, and the many commercial aspects of technologically driven, top-down globalisation, where ICTs are portrayed as likely to threaten individual security and destroy, rather than benefit, the community.

Community
In the various government ICT based strategies there are calls on the community to 'be a partner,' to 'buy in' to 'provide grassroots support' to 'own ICT projects' and to 'make them sustainable.' The use of the term community tends to imply a territorial unit, but nowhere is this unit clearly defined, nor do these documents address the question of whether or not these territorial communities exist in a form that is able to utilise the new ICT tools to enable their potential to be realised. Although not explicitly stated, the appeal to community tends to point to a nostalgic notion of community, one where people in it have a relatively shared notion of values, culture, and feeling of connectedness and belonging. However, globalising pressures from the mass media, the increased mobility of people into and between communities, the speed of information flows, and increased insecurity, including and fear of other people and technologies, severely constrain the coming together of community.

Community is thus not something that can be taken for granted, but has to be actively retrieved. As the government strategy suggests, ICT tools can reconnect people but for this to work well, this potential needs to be understood, and strategies developed that are clearly grounded in the needs and aspirations of specific communities. We suggest that for this potential to be understood and realised, a wider conceptual framework is essential. Lash (1994) points in a useful direction when, instead of ICTs, he refers to information and communication (I&C) structures, and argues that participation in these structures increasingly determines whether or not people can participate in

today's society. For Lash, participation involves much more than access to computers and attending a computer class. He argues:

> *...through television, including satellite and cable, radio, video recorders and the like, the new lower class may not be on the information-manipulating [creative] end, but they most surely are on the communications, and especially symbol and image-communication, receiving end of the I&C structures (Lash, 1994:134).*

In New Zealand Ross Himona develops further the case for the importance of local place and ICTs, however he notes that those at the receiving end also want access to the global culture:

> *The adoption of the Music CD, VCR and digital TV technologies by poor people in my country puts the lie to the concept of a digital divide in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Poor people adopted those quite expensive technologies regardless of their economic circumstances, and they adopted and paid for access to those technologies in order to gain access to entertainment, i.e. to music, movies and sport. In the poorest areas of Aotearoa New Zealand houses and shacks bristle with CD players, VCRs and digital TV dishes (Himona 2003).*

Himona argues that it is not enough to give people computers and access to the Internet because "there is very little of interest to local people" therefore, account must be taken of the competition from the global mass media and people must be "engaged through the imagination rather than the intellect." How to put the tools for creativity into people's hands to enable participation in information and communication structures is the challenge.

Community networking model
In St Albans (1992-2002), there were a number of innovative ICT supported community projects that attempted to draw upon the creativity of the community. These projects were not primarily about learning to use ICTs, but were about people coming together because they wanted to be involved in community and to use ICTs as one of the tools to help achieve this. Very importantly, for the community-networking model to be effective, it is necessary to begin with a clear concept of community. John Wardle outlined the problematic when he said:

> *To give, to receive and to care are some of the most important elements of worthwhile community, but this cannot happen if we do not know what is happening. It's a sad state of affairs when someone is in need and someone is offering, but the two cannot find each other. In modern cities this is very common. Effective community needs **good information** to happen. Without it we have tragic waste. This can be in the form of loneliness and isolation or of food, goods and energy. It takes **good communication** to find that kind word or spare cabbage its most welcome home [emphasis our own] (Ashton, 2002:161).*

The community ICT projects were thus focused primarily, not on teaching technology, but on how it could be deployed to generate 'good communication' and 'community information' so that the local community could develop with a sense of itself as a social entity and a clear sense of its own aspirations and needs.

Community ICT projects
1. Free Community Paper
In December 1993 to begin connecting all in the locality a free community paper was produced on a community member's desktop publishing computer and a further household's garage printer. This was distributed to 5,000 households and businesses. The paper continues to the present day. It relies on advertising from local business to pay printing and distribution costs, receives an annual grant of

around one thousand dollars from the Community Board, uses voluntary labour for production, and local people for their written contribution. Participation was intended to be comprehensive, with all in the community being encouraged to be involved.

2. Electronic Bulletin Board
A community bulletin board was developed in 1995. The community paper was pivotal in getting and sustaining support. Local people, especially immigrants and young people gave considerable energy. It gained some, albeit reluctant support from the Community Board for a computer and software and for some money to employ a local person for project co-ordination. In contrast to the paper, it enabled 'many to many' communication, any time of the day or night.

3. Community Website
In 1998 a community website replaced the bulletin board. The website was much enhanced in 2000, when about 20 local people from diverse backgrounds produced a professional looking website. The website was continuously updated with news-breaking stories written by local people, rather than journalists, about their own locality. Integral to the website was an interactive discussion board to encourage local conversations and discussions. The site was soon receiving around 2,000 hits per month. This website was replaced in 2002, but without the same proactive efforts to encourage full participation. It is currently being re-vamped (www.stalbans.gen.nz).

Community-networking principles involved
1. Networking locally
Everyone lives somewhere and, at some time or other, people have needs that can more easily be met at a local level. Most people would like to know thier family and friends live in friendly neighbourhoods where people will do some looking out for each other. In St Albans, it was recognised that often people had feared leaving their households. The aim of the ICT projects was to get people communicating. It was discovered that far from being selfish individuals, many people were pleased to help.

ICTs tend to be thought of as taking people away from their communities. In St Albans, the idea was to use ICT as a means of actually involving people in their community. As a direct result of ICT projects, many groups were formed, (choir, youth, residents, cultural, history, arts) community events held (gala days, breakfasts, tours) leadership grown, and many needs met (for instance, a useful feature of the bulletin board was help with homework).

2. Local networking in order to organise and effectively mobiliseeffectively
Currently there is much media discussion about the low voter turn out for the recent local government elections, and the fact that many people do not know who their representatives are anymore. This is not surprising because local issues, while very important to the people concerned, are not generally picked up or given sustained, effective treatment by the larger media outlets. Consequently, people often do not know what is happening in their local area, and if they do, then they often do not feel they can make a difference. In St Albans, examples of effective mobilization included saving a local hall, buying land for a community park and developing it in the way local people (including children) wanted, setting up a skateboard and saving some popular trees. These trees were the only large ones standing, and because they were not protected, it took some mobilizing to ensure they would not be cut down.

People tend not to recognize the need to prioritize effective networking for developing community. In St Albans, the philosophy was based on the fact that 'everyone had something to offer' and it was just a matter of setting up visible and effective communication processes whereby people could combine to contribute their ideas and skills. For instance, in their submissions to the council, the children were able to win the hearts and minds of the mayor and city councilors. However, for this to be effective, they had to be in turn networked to people who understood council processes, and who were inspired by their local media to participate.

3. Local information
The community paper and website are repositories of local information, creating an institutional memory. The community website had a search engine, meaning that community information could easily be retrieved. At a time when there is information overload, and when bureaucracies are commonly, the only ones with information and institutional memories, it is necessary for communities to create, their own information.

Increasingly the need to innovate, be creative, and work in teams is being stressed; yet many ICT community projects focus solely on teaching individuals to use computers. In St Albans, the most significant innovation was enabling individuals through computers to be more connected strengthening networks and giving people a greater sense of belonging. In this way more could be achieved, including the teaching of computer skills

4. Drawing on local networking to relate more effectively beyond the community
The community is often called on ensure its projects are sustainable. Often this is limited to fitting into requirements for current funding rounds. In St Albans, a coordinator with good skills in involving diverse people in community networks, points the way to a model that could be fully sustainable.
Conclusion
ICT in many of its applications has a tendency to be over focused on the technological aspects rather than the communication and networking possibilities that this can enable. For sustainable communities people need the ability to communicate with each other and generate their own networks and information to meet their self defined needs and aspirations. In this way, communities can through the use information and communication tools engage more actively in creating their own futures within which all are enabled to achieve their potential.

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