

# **Developing Community Communications: A framework for empowering networked communities**

## **A Draft Position Paper**

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### **Introduction**

Communications and communication media/technologies have been instrumental in developing and sustaining community infrastructures throughout the ages. It is hardly a startling revelation to suggest that people have always utilised information and communication technologies (ICT) or media to communicate and share knowledge with others both within and beyond the boundaries of their communities. From Stone Age rock paintings to Town Criers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; from simple community newsletters produced on mechanical duplicating machines to web-based community networks and community media initiatives, communication has been and remains the bedrock upon which the social networks, groups, clubs, organisations, activities and actions that constitute the community environment are formed, developed and sustained. In essence, despite the diverse and oft contested nature of community environments, communication, in its many guises, continues to provide the life-blood that nurtures and sustains community life in the modern information intensive, technology driven world in which we live.

Despite the significance of communications to modern society many citizens are excluded from participating effectively in the digital world, leaving them marginalised and without a voice. Unequipped and unable to engage effectively with ICT, many “members of our communities are missing out on the benefits which digital technologies can offer” (HM Government, 2008, p.9). Of course what these benefits are and who decides is very much open to debate – a point to which I will return later in this text.

For now it is important to acknowledge and seek to understand why so many attempts to ameliorate social inequalities through public access computing and Internet programmes, with few noticeable exceptions, have often proven ineffective in: improving the quality of life, promoting social inclusion or, building healthy communities. ICT alone cannot provide the necessary material conditions to address the diverse and often competing social needs found in geographic communities. To date, there has been a serious lack of any contextualised consideration, in policy/funding circles and among many academics, of how ICT might be used to address social needs and wants in a manner that empowers citizens and communities to shape their own lives. In addition to the techno-economic determinism that has driven much of the Information/Network Society agenda of the past 2 decades (Day & Schuler, 2004; Schuler & Day, 2004), there has been a tendency toward short-term project funding for public access computing parachuted into local communities (Day & Harris, 1997). Over and over again opportunities to develop effective ICT strategies and policies in support of community empowerment and capacity building and to promote and sustain digital inclusion have been missed. Even in this age of mobile and agile computing/communications, where many technological brand names form part of everyday life in the network age; the act of possession

simply identifies us as consumers rather than citizens of a network society – influenced and shaped by the vagaries of the market place and PR agencies rather than actively shaping the world in which we live.

Drawing on theories of community practice in the network society (Day & Schuler, 2004; Schuler & Day, 2004), the work of Community Media 4 Kenya evolved from an Economic & Social Research Council funded project called Community Network Analysis project which later evolved into Community Networks for Action which was based on the proposition that the planning, implementation and sustainable development of effective community ICT initiatives must be grounded in the assets and needs of the community environment if they are to contribute to building, strengthening and sustaining community network ties, social cohesion and social capital. The CNA team's rationale considered communication technologies as innovative community development tools, media (spaces) and processes that support ways in which the community infrastructure engages in and shapes the relationships and activities of local community environments.

In the midst of a community technology policy/practice impasse there has been signs of the occasional encouraging indicators of alternative ways of understanding community information and communication needs in network societies. For example, a report from the Community Development Foundation (CDF) commissioned by the Home Office for example, underlined the significance of social cohesion through inclusive initiatives (Chanan, 2004). The report proposed that understanding healthy communities depends on establishing what is 'going on' in the communities and what is needed. Flourishing communities, it argued, require good connectivity within and beyond the locality. The connectivity referred to in this instance was between people, however, supplementing this view, the Performance and Innovation Unit in Whitehall has recognised the potential of ICT in sustaining local community social capital and connectivity (Aldridge *et al*, 2002). What is most impressive however, are the occasions when people just get out there and find a way of making things happen. The work of Media Citizens, who engage in creative community media partnerships; or the often unfunded and always underfunded work of Steve Thompson in Teesside creates platforms for a range of innovative, grassroots community voice initiatives; or the amazing work of Hugh Flouch in developing a lively and flourishing community network for the London neighbourhood of Harringay, where local people came together to build online and real world connection for the good of the community.

These initiatives have their own amazing stories to tell but this paper draws on CNA and latterly CM4K experiences of working on community technology partnership projects of research and practice to date. CNA partnerships seek to bring together the enthusiasm, expertise and knowledge of community groups and citizens with that of academics and technologists from all levels of the Higher Education spectrum. From undergraduate and post-grad students studying Community Media at the University of Brighton to researchers, lecturers and technicians interested in utilising communication technologies to develop, build and sustain healthy communities, our approach grounds itself in the social needs of our community partners, especially the information and communication needs. Sometimes these initiatives work and benefit community and academics alike. Other times they don't but whether successful or not there are always important lessons to be learned. It is from these experiences and drawing on the lessons we've learned that we present this framework for empowering and networking communities.

### **Community informatics/technology—understanding the complexity**

As a field of activity or subject of study, the waters surrounding the nascent discipline

of community informatics/technology are muddled by the fact that community informatics represents two distinct but related areas of social interaction and endeavour: (1) the study of community uses of ICT, i.e. community informatics/technology as a field of research; and (2) the practices of community ICT usage, i.e. community informatics as a field of practice. Community informatics/technology therefore comprises 2 main component parts—research and practice. These component parts can in turn be sub-divided still further into areas of activity and discourse coming from often diverse and divergent cultures. Informatics/technology practices, for example, are influenced by information systems design, computer programming, web development, Web 2.0 and social networking app development, digital media, content management systems and so on. However, because the context for these activities is community they can and should be—but are seldom—influenced by community development workers/agencies, community organisers, community groups and even community policy makers. There is a need for dialogue between these and many other such fields of human endeavour.

If we then factor in the different academic disciplines and milieu of diverse academic and organisational cultures of those interested in community informatics research, a rich picture of complex beliefs, norms, value systems and practices begins to emerge.

### **Technology as a social structure**

It is widely understood that social structures such as law, politics, religious and cultural beliefs, the economy and even language shape social interaction and that social experience and interaction shape social structures in turn. Despite this understanding, a deep-rooted and passive acceptance of technology exists at many levels of the information society or digital age. It is almost as if a myth surrounds technology (Illich 1990).

As a society, we appear more inclined to accept social circumstances resulting from the implementation and use of ICT than we are for other, more familiar, social structures, e.g. legal or political (Sclove 1995). Because ICT have been portrayed as modern, inevitable and, of course, fun—linked as they are to the consumption of entertainment goods and services—they are often not subject to the same public scrutiny that other social structures receive, despite their pervasive nature. As such, ICT often remain the undemocratic preserve of ‘experts’ – many from academia with little engagement with the real world community life. A consequence of this has been that the development of information society or digital age social policy, depending, as it does, almost exclusively on the advice of ‘experts’ involved in the production of entertainment goods and services, often fails to meet the broader social needs, ideals and aspirations of culturally diverse citizens and communities in a democratic society. Of course, interpretation of democracy is subjective and can take many forms (Giddens 1993). However, participation is a central component for both democracy and a sense of community that not only values but also celebrates diversity in society (Galbraith, 1994). This forms a basic tenet of a community-centred philosophy of technology. Applying this understanding of democracy in the ‘digital age’ or ‘information society’ leads naturally to an argument that, if citizens ought to be empowered to participate in determining their society’s basic structure, and technologies are an important species of social structure, it follows that technological design and practice should be democratized. (Sclove 1995, pp 26–27)

From a community informatics/technology perspective, as citizens participate in the design, implementation and development processes of community ICT initiatives, changes can result in the technological order which exert structural influence on the democratic process. Through this participation the democratic process, in turn, affects the community technological order. However, arguments relating to participative democracy in an ‘information society’ remain abstract unless they are expanded into a framework of specific guidelines for democratic design, or democratic

design criteria (Slove 1995). It is beyond the scope of this position paper to develop such a framework here. Perhaps these discussions form the starting point of a dialogue to undertake this task. The important point for now is that such design considerations should not be reified; that they can and should be adapted to suit circumstance, need and changes therein.

Within local communities such design criteria should always represent the citizens' best assessment of collective and individual aspirations and needs. There can never be a blueprint or 'one best way' (Taylor 1911) of designing democratic technologies, which underlines the importance of valorising diversity.

### **Partnership Education: Action Research & Learning Scenarios (PEARLS) – Community-based learning through empowered voices**

A paper for to the EU's 6<sup>th</sup> Living Knowledge Conference (currently in production) tells the story of a community media partnership through the voices and experiences of the collaborators. Founding partners of the Community Media 4 Kenya network include the International Youth Council of Kenya; Faces for Peace; Focus Youth Initiative; K-Youth Media; SEMA Youth Film Festival; a number of NGOs working in rural Kenya and the Community Media 4 Kenya (CM4K) students at the University of Brighton. Now in its 4<sup>th</sup> year, CM4K started as an experiment, in community-based or service learning, in which students and community became the focus of a mutual knowledge and learning environment, in which community media tools, spaces and processes were shared to empower local voices; support opportunities for socio-economic development; promote diversity and mutual cultural understanding between students and community. Totally self-financing, Media Studies students raise funds to ensure their skills, knowledge, expertise and enthusiasm makes a difference each year by addressing the needs and aspirations of the community partners. Drawing on experiential learning the PEARLS approach requires students to **engage** with partners to map assets and identify needs; **assess** how assets might be used to address needs; **plan** and develop all aspects of the partnership activities; **create** and test the interventions in the field; and **reflect** critically in dialogue at each stage. To date, much of the CM4K work has been geared toward assessing the capability of students and community partners collaborating with limited finances and resources. However, the interest among community partners has been compelling enough for the University of Brighton to formalise the fieldtrip into the undergraduate curriculum.