

Community Networking Strategies: partnerships for community practice, research and engagement – creating a shared knowledgebase

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Background of Organizers

DR PETER DAY HAS A LONG HISTORY OF ACADEMIC AND PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE IN THE COMMUNITY TECHNOLOGY MOVEMENT. A SENIOR LECTURER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON, PETER WAS A FOUNDER MEMBER OF THE SUSSEX COMMUNITY INTERNET (INFORMATION) PROJECT (SCIP). HE IS THE PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR AND PROJECT MANAGER OF THE COMMUNITY NETWORK ANALYSIS PROJECT AND IS A FOUNDER MEMBER OF THE COMMUNITY INFORMATICS RESEARCH NETWORK (CIRN), PETER HAS PUBLISHED EXTENSIVELY IN THIS FIELD.

Workshop Summary

Communities often lack the type of information and communication infrastructure needed to: 1) support and sustain the social networks of clubs, organisations, associations, groups, agencies, families and individual citizens that constitute the structures, organisation and activities of community life; and 2) enable effective organisation, planning and enactment of local campaigns when threatened by external agency. Network technologies present interesting opportunities to support community networking activities but in and of themselves do not constitute community networks. A need exists for the development of appropriate and effective strategies that facilitate community appropriation of communication technologies in support of the social network relationships required to build, organise and sustain active communities. The community networking strategies workshop provides a forum to discuss and explore ways in which community informatics/technology researchers engage with communities.

Motivation, Goals and Conference Themes

As the conference call for papers claims, “the ability of people around the world to discuss, work, make decisions, and take action collaboratively is one of the most important capabilities for addressing these challenges.” Despite growing numbers of claims that ‘community’ no longer exists, people in all parts of the world continue to connect with one another to socialise, plan events and organise activities that build

and improve the communities in which they live. Community is the building block of society. Social networks, trust, respect for diversity and a commitment to improving socio-cultural environments, i.e. social capital (Putnam, 2000), provide the conditions for building and sustaining healthy community.

As social constructs, community networks are not new and they are most certainly not a construct of the 'Information Age' or 'Network Society'. Community networks have been contributing to community life for many years. In his seminal text on the emergence of 'new', i.e. ICT based, community networks, Schuler explains how the term 'community networks' was a sociological concept – that referred to community communication patterns and relationships (1996) – long before the emergence of the community bulletin boards of the late 1970s (Morino, 1994), i.e. the forerunners for the web-based community networks of the 1990s onwards (Kubicek & Wagner, 1998).

Understanding the significance of communications and social relationships to community networking provides a starting point for addressing the challenges of planning, designing, developing and sustaining 'new' community networks. Making connections and interacting with people of diverse values and belief systems is a crucial component of community networking. However, community networks are increasingly referred to as technological artefacts and appear to be understood in terms of the connectivity they give to ICT rather than the links they enable to be built within communities.

A quick search for community networks on Wikipedia reveals that "Community Network is a term used broadly to indicate use of networking technologies by and for a local community (Wikipedia, 2006)." Few would disagree with the statement but it lacks any sense of purpose. A slightly more developed definition refers to computer-based systems "supporting, augmenting, and extending already existing social networks". This updated definition hints at social rather than exclusively technological 'uses' but it still does not address questions pertinent to community uses of network technologies. 1) For what purpose/s would communities want to use network technologies? 2) How can ICT benefit communities in ways that are meaningful to the communities themselves?

Establishing what lies at the heart of community networking, i.e. the purpose and nature of the relationships within communities and the processes of communication, is central to understanding what community is all about. Generating knowledge of what shapes and energizes community life is pivotal to developing effective community networks. In this respect the effectiveness of community networks is understood in terms of how they support and sustain community communications, relationships and activities.

Main activities and goals

The workshop will make use of an adapted version of the following scenario:

Following a recent community consultation exercise organised by the community association, a forum of local residents identified a need for an ICT supported community network, as a priority. The community network should provide technological tools, media (space) and processes that will support democratic community building and sustain social networking in the community infrastructure. Using your own experiences and knowledge of community social networks networking as a resource, develop a plan for setting up and running a community network that is representative of local needs.

In addition to identifying and listing the social networks that comprise the community infrastructure to solve this problem, you might need to consider the following issues among others:

- What issues will you prioritise when developing your community engagement strategy?
- How will you ensure the community network represents the needs of the community?
- How will it be planned, designed, implemented and developed?
- What organisational issues will need to be considered?
- How will the network be funded?
- How will sustainability be addressed?

Participants will collaborate in groups to solve the problem outlined in the scenario. Assuming roles of researcher, practitioners and community, workshop members will need to consider how to develop a meaningful dialogue and partnerships in order to address the challenges set by the scenario. Prior to, during and after the conference, participants will be encouraged to share their personal experiences, stories insights, and papers of community network collaborations on a workshop wiki, which will act as a collaborative community networking strategies knowledgebase. Using participatory learning and techniques, the workshop is designed to engage directly with participants' experiences of working with and within diverse communities.

Intended Audience

Community technology researchers interested in exploring how to develop meaningful partnerships with communities so that community informatics is truly about 'doing things with communities' rather than 'doing things to them'.

References

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