

Chapter XXII

Building a Path for Future Communities

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ABSTRACT

With mobile technologies increasingly weaving themselves into the fabric of our communities, it would be beneficial to increase our understanding of how these devices will affect our quality of life. This chapter presents a case study where a set of prototypes of future social technology concepts were generated and used by groups of backpackers in a mobile community. One of these concepts, which facilitated viewing the locations of other group members, is evaluated with regard to how it might affect community development. This and other examples illustrate that communication technologies form a social path which guides individual and emergent behavior of societies. Determination of where these paths lead can be accomplished through the creation of development projects with positive social aims. Using collaborative research methods, considering design outcome spectra, and adding features with implicit cultural values are promising strategies for influencing future communities.

Technology. That's always been your Achilles heel in this part of the world.

—Obadiah Stane to Raza, *Iron Man*, 2008

INTRODUCTION

Mobile technologies are rapidly becoming a permanent part of the social fabric of our society. Common interactions such as maintaining family relationships, getting directions to meet up, seeking

guidance on the quality of a restaurant, or rating political candidates, are all increasingly being accomplished via mobile phones. It is these minutiae of daily social interactions which give rise to culture and greatly affect our quality of life. Consequently, there is a valid concern that if these technologies

are developed without regard to facilitating positive, democratic and humane social environments, they may actually reduce the quality of life of large numbers of people. If it is agreed that positive socio-technical systems are a desired goal for technology developers, there remains the question of how to attain it.

This chapter provides a case study demonstrating a process whereby the complex interactions between groups, technologies and emergent socio-technical systems can be explored. The study evaluated a number of social technology concepts in the context of a mobile community of backpackers. The research method used enabled us to understand more about the social structure which new devices would be introduced into and record requirements. Outcomes of the studies included over 57 product concepts, 67 user requirements, and a rich description of the social and physical context. The results of the study also provide a glimpse into how a future community of backpackers with new social tools might operate. It is through this type of exploration that we can start to envision building tools which provide a constructive path for individuals to follow in creating their own future communities.

SOCIAL GOALS FOR COMPELLING PRODUCTS

It is increasingly common to find software and Internet companies building creative business models around community-based products with charitable and socially responsible goals. For example, Google has expressed an interest in building platforms and APIs which empower local communities to rapidly build technologies to help themselves. During the 2007 wildfires in and around San Diego, CA, several organizations utilized the Google Maps API to communicate which areas of the city were currently burning or where evacuation orders were in place (Wagner, 2007).

Similarly, several sites on the web help communities operate by providing forums for user participation and community interaction. These tools

implicitly build in the ideals of free speech, satire, whistle-blowing, personal empowerment, and helping others. For example, YouTube has had Egyptian users post videos of police abuse which led to jail sentences for officers (Anderson, 2007). They are similarly facilitating education and debate around the 2008 US election process (“CNN/YouTube debate: Video streams,” 2007). Another ratings site, Yelp, gives users a forum to rate and comment on everything from restaurants to religious organizations (“Yelp.com,” 2007). They also have a section for Health and Medical to support rating doctors and other medical professionals. These sites help provide a degree of oversight and community advice which would otherwise be lost in the anonymity and complexity of large cities.

There are also non-profit corporations that produce mobile technology products with social aims; these indirectly compete with and influence profit-based corporations. For example, the non-profit OLPC project started with the goal of “providing children around the world with new opportunities to explore, experiment and express themselves.” (Teletico, 2007) OLPC founder, Nicholas Negroponte stated that “It’s an education project, not a laptop project.” (“One Laptop Per Child,” 2007).

These examples demonstrate that technology design has the potential to facilitate and thereby encourage certain values and behaviors amongst user communities. With Internet access becoming more widespread daily, it is possible for a web application to be rapidly used all around the planet shortly after development. This brings with it entirely new opportunities for the spread of cultural values.

BACKPACKERS: A DISTRIBUTED MOBILE COMMUNITY

Backpackers have been described as “travelers who exhibit a preference for budget accommodation; an emphasis on meeting other people (locals and travelers); an independently organized and flexible travel schedule; longer rather than brief holidays; and an emphasis on informal and participatory recreation

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