

Chapter XI

Conclusion

COMMUNITIES OF THE NEW WORLD ORDER

A new set of conditions for healthy growth and adaptation is emerging for 21st century communities. This book has sought to explain what some of these conditions are, and to advise forward-thinking community leaders and stakeholders about how to take advantage of broadband bi-directional telecommunications to assure a better future for all.

The high-speed Internet has given individuals, institutions and businesses ways to more efficiently connect and collaborate with one another, locally and globally. With pervasive digital networks in place, the economics of access, innovation and distribution have undergone radical transformation. The costs continue to drop throughout the value chain of products and services.

The instruments of digital product, service and content creation that only a century ago were in the hands of governments, and only a decade ago were in the hands of big business, are now in the hands of local entrepreneurs and citizens as well. Anyone with a personal computer can now be a publisher, and anyone with an Internet connection can be a producer, marketer and distributor. Ordinary citizens who once thought of themselves only as consumers of other people's products can now

create their own content and build applications that can be—and are being—sold and adopted globally as well as locally. The democratization of the tools of content and service production and the collaborative networks that make information exchange more efficient and productive allow for more prosperous communities.

The reality of the Network Society and its effects are rooted in the past. The vision of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) was initially articulated in the United Nations in the 1980s. A similar vision again surfaced in the 1990s with the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) sponsored by the International Telecommunications Union. Perceiving that information services were a new and important form of trade that excluded them, less economically advanced nations wanted access to the technological infrastructure needed to assure their future participation. These international debates focused on policy and structural solutions for democratizing communication and correcting imbalances in information flow between and among countries.

In the first decade of the 21st century, variations on the New Order and the Information Society debates continue, but with a surprising new focus on policy and structural solutions for local communities. The emphasis has shifted from national and international players to local stakeholders and players. The strategies are those of self-help and collaborative partnerships that democratize down to the citizen level. With the advent of the broadband Internet, the Network Society has taken on a different materiality in that it has no physical boundaries and is global in scope, yet its management takes place at local and regional levels with a very different set of dynamics than was ever anticipated.

The authors admit that ubiquitous connectivity and local empowerment are not the reality of the first decade of the 21st century. However, the new digital infrastructure and the means to access are sufficiently widespread to act as a force for community-initiated change. Thus, wherever they exist, they provide a context for hope.

Since 2003, the Intelligent Community Forum (ICF) has helped community leaders and stakeholders to understand the promise of the Network Society. The ICF is a New York-based think tank focusing on job creation and economic development in what it calls “the broadband economy”. In giving Intelligent Community of the Year awards to towns, cities and regions, the ICF has drawn international attention to the unprecedented confluence of technological, economic and social conditions that make it possible for communities to think collaboratively about repositioning themselves for a better future.

The authors, serving as advisors to the ICF and working in our own communities, have come to view “networked communities” as the front line of a global transformation that will shape the future of all humankind for decades to come. Towns, cities and regions are where people live and work, and reach out to the world.

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