



## Chapter III

# Embedding the Net: Community Empowerment in the Age of Information

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## Introduction

Throughout the world millions of people are getting online to the Internet to exchange information and communicate with each other to form what Howard Rheingold has famously described as 'virtual communities' (1994). The revolutionary potential of the new Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), currently epitomized by the Internet and other Web-based technologies, to transform social relations has not surprisingly grasped the imagination of the media, academics, politicians, businesspeople and members of the public more generally. It has produced an extensive and often fierce debate about the possible beneficial consequences of such technological developments for social interaction which is based more around common interests rather than spatial proximity. Such optimistic visions have also been matched by alternative dystopian depictions of the new media facilitating the emergence of surveillance societies (Lyon, 1994; Davies, 1996). Yet, in whatever form the arguments are couched, their emphasis on remote communication often acts to disassociate individuals from the everyday experience of the communities they live in. It is as if there is no place for localized face-to-face interaction between people in the Information Age. Whilst we do not preclude 'communities of interest' and recognize that the term community itself can be used in many ways, our own approach to community informatics (CI) has been shaped by the desire to reconnect locally spaced communities to the wider electronic network of cyberspace.

Community informatics is an approach which offers the opportunity to connect cyberspace to community place: to investigate how ICTs can be geographically embedded and developed by community groups themselves to support networks of people who already know and care about each other. It thereby recognizes both the transforming qualities of ICTs as well as the continuing importance of community

as an intermediate level of social life between the personal (individual/family) and the impersonal (institutional/global). The numerous community enthusiasts, some of whom are mentioned in this book, who are building interactive Web sites, virtual chat rooms and electronic-lists as tools to support local communication between their members, are a striking testament to the value of a CI perspective.

This chapter attempts to explore a model of CI which has as its primary focus the empowerment of individuals within local social networks by means of the adoption and exploitation of ICTs. It is an approach which emphasizes the need for the new technologies to be shaped by the human aspirations and desires emanating from existing community social structures rather than the expectation of new modes of social intercourse required to meet the technical, commercial and political designs of 'outsiders.' It seeks to challenge the often well-intentioned but flawed policy initiatives to impose technological solutions to perceived social problems from above. Instead it is an approach which stresses that technologies should be embedded within existing cultural and social relations. This is a perspective which requires the development of policy strategies aimed at stimulating the stock of what Robert Putnam has described as 'social capital' (Putnam, 1995): the strength of social networks, the level of trust between members, the degree of collaboration, the extent of participation, and the experience of negotiation which enables communities to control their own economic, cultural, and social development. It thereby proposes a new form of community development for the information age.

The chapter is structured first to provide a background to the difficulties of defining the notion of community, its continued importance for understanding social life, the limitations of cyber visionary approaches to CI and the need for an 'empowerment' perspective, and the essential requirements for such an approach in terms of access and awareness raising, skill development, and support. The final section of the chapter provides a more speculative discussion of an approach which addresses the problem of sustainability through the suggested inversion of current public service organization and flows of public resources.

## Context

As in previous periods of economic and social restructuring the place of communities in our societies and their potential displacement has been a significant talking point. The dramatic social and cultural upheavals arising from the development of what Manuel Castells describes as global informational economies (Castells, 1996) and the concomitant processes of post industrialization experienced in many economically advanced societies are in large part driven (but not determined) by the transforming qualities of the new ICTs. Community structures built around modernist cultural identity and architectures, standardized work practices and related social discipline are frequently depicted in the popular media as in the process of terminal decay. Rising crime levels, the breakdown of family structures (particularly in western society), the persistence of high unemployment figures, significant educational underachievement and growing health inequalities are all common traits said to arise from the collapse of community living. Its replacement is portrayed as the

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