



Chapter IV

The Role of Community Information in the Virtual Metropolis: The Co-Existence of Virtual and Proximate Terrains¹

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Community Informatics and the Virtual Metropolis

Traditionally communities have been linked to the underlying geography, so that the identity of a community, for instance a neighborhood in a city, was linked to an underlying physical place, as part of a legal jurisdiction. A different kind of community is made possible by the self-identification of individuals with a common interest. In defining the concept of community informatics, Michael Gurstein in his preceding introductory chapter, makes a distinction between the type of “virtual community” made possible by the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs), and the augmented communication that ICTs can facilitate in a physical community. Thus the term connotes at least two different kinds of aggregate relationships, the first primarily physical (proximate), and the second, primarily conceptual (virtual). An example of this would include, for instance, alumni of the hypothetical Prestigious University who, while no longer physically present on campus, maintain strong identities as *alumni*, which can be thought of a part of the conceptual space defining “the University.” Initially they were part of a physical community, but ultimately they are part of a virtual community. Another variant of this would be primarily virtual, citizens who consider themselves part of a large metropolitan area, for instance, Washington, DC, and refer to themselves as *Washingtonians* even if they might live in an adjacent jurisdiction in the neighboring state of Virginia. In this sense we could say that in either case we had a virtual (or conceptual) relationship that bears only a symbolic connection with the underlying “place.”

The widespread deployment of ICTs has made relatively common a kind of nonphysical “space” constructed of digital bits that Manuel Castells has referred to as a “space of flows” (Castells, 1989). At first glance, an abstract place, it can seem more familiar if thought of in terms suggested above, in which identity is related to a virtual (or conceptual) space rather than linked to a purely physical one. As usage of ICTs have become commonplace, this virtual space has gone from being an exotic place, inhabited by a few intrepid souls, to a teeming bazaar of information driven activity.² And, in many respects, activities common in the physical world have been replicated in the virtual world. This has interesting ramifications for proximate, geographic communities.

The increasingly widespread availability of Internet access provided by commercial Internet service providers (ISPs), at least in U.S. urbanized areas, has undermined one of the early *raison d'être* for community based information networks,³ establishment of access (in this case, originally simply connectivity) to the Internet. This raises an interesting question for some of these early colonizers of the virtual world— what is the role for community networks in the Brave New Wired World? It has become apparent that mere connectivity to the Internet *does not* equal access, as the entire concept of access to information infrastructure has become a more complex and multifaceted proposition. The conceptual approach of community informatics emphasizes the need to address the larger contextual issues encompassing access, including access to equipment, understanding of the use of information, motivation to achieve access to these infrastructures, and inclusivity and diversity of participants. Finally, and most problematic, what sort of parameters do we use to measure the boundaries of “community” in the virtual metropolis, or gage the efficacy of ICTs in geographic community development efforts?

This chapter explores some of the structural and policy issues related to the implementation and operation of community-based information networks and examines three different types of community networks (CNs), drawing on theories of diffusion of innovation to provide a framework for analysis. The three cases presented here focus primarily on the implementation of CNs, that is, the combination of ICTs (hardware/software), the organizational structures, and the participants (or users) designed to facilitate information flows in several types of proximate communities. Conclusions are then drawn as to role of virtual interactions in the operation of CNs. For the purposes of analysis, the critical components of the framework include:

- *Key Actors*, or participants involved in the community network (ICT framework);
- *Innovation Factor*, or what action was critical in the initiation of the community information system;
- *Opportunities and Barriers*, variables influencing the implementation and development of the community information systems;
- *Policy Outcomes/Assessment*, what outcomes occurred as a result of the implementation of the systems.

The analysis further explores the relationship of these information-related communities to the underlying political and physical geography, or alternatively,

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