



Chapter VI

Building the Information Society from the Bottom Up? EU Public Policy and Community Informatics in North West England

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If information and communications technologies are to be used to support community efforts to achieve social and economic development, then policies which link emerging technological opportunities with the social and economic context must be devised. In the European regions, the many organizations which promote community informatics have increasingly taken up the concept of the Information Society as both an objective and a rationale for such policy making. The key player in proselytizing this concept has been the Commission of the European Union and monies from EU Structural Funds have been deployed in a series of community, regional and interregional informatics initiatives which started in the early 1990s. In these initiatives, increasing emphasis has been laid on the devolution of decision making to the community, user access and the empowerment of those who risk exclusion from the potential benefits of ICTs. In brief, the Commission has sought to create a policy environment which encourages local and regional actors to build the "Information Society" from the bottom up.

Whilst European policy on ICTs in the 1980s was characterized by programs such as Esprit which sought to close the technological gap with the USA and Japan, policy in the 1990s has been characterized by a growing awareness of the social aspects of information and communications technologies. Not only have the economic and social policies of the EU been affected, but the strategies for research and development have been influenced too. The present Fifth Framework program pays

special attention to the “creation of a user-friendly information society” which is both coherent and socially inclusive. Greater emphasis on the social context of ICTs has allowed community groups, local authorities and small businesses to take advantage of EU funding to develop or establish a wide range of informatics projects. Their objectives cover not only improving the performance of SMEs, but education and training, the reduction of social exclusion, the improvement of health services and the promotion of tourism. While the central aim of most EU programs remains regional and local economic regeneration, a much deeper appreciation of the role that informatics can play in this process has been developed. Explicitly or otherwise, at an EU, national and regional level, policy makers in the public, private and voluntary sectors are picking up items from the agenda of those theorists whose vision of a post-industrial society fuelled the Information Society debate in the 1970s and '80s.

In this discussion, our concern centers on the interaction between the policy makers in the European Commission and those who act at regional and local level. We shall briefly examine the origins of the Information Society concept and then investigate the different ways in which it has appeared in European policy making. At the European level, we shall pay particular attention to those agencies of the European Commission responsible for regional development, employment, social affairs and informatics which are working together in the Regional Information Society Initiative and the Information Society Project Office (ISPO). Moving to the local level, we shall argue that European regional and metropolitan authorities have entered into a cross-national, multilevel nexus of policymaking with national governments and the European Commission: a network which provides mutual support for informatics initiatives.

At the regional level, we shall focus on informatics projects and their promoters in North West England in order to explore the role of this network in the implementation of Information Society policies and their consequences for the growth of community telematics. The watchwords of such EU programs have, in recent years, been partnership, participation and integration. In fostering attempts to create the Information Society, the European Commission through “top-down” policies has promoted the idea of a “bottom-up” approach and has often been seen to bypass national governments in order to deal directly with regional and local actors. Regional bodies have been encouraged to build links with other European areas and a methodology advanced which is built on the idea of shared experience. We argue that such public policy intervention has been crucial in the realization of community informatics initiatives.

In conclusion, we shall draw on the North West experience to assess the relative importance of the different levels of policy making and to identify the nature of the interaction between local actors, regional authorities and European agencies. In this way we hope to show the extent to which European Commission efforts made from the top down have been effective in stimulating or strengthening initiatives coming from the bottom up.

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