



Chapter IX

Community Networks for Reinventing Citizenship and Democracy

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When the Milan and Bologna community networks were designed and launched in 1994, the goal was not simply to give access to all, but, by doing so, to take a step toward reinventing citizenship and democracy. This chapter first presents the “vision” behind that goal and then summarizes the outcomes of these early experiences in terms of the original goal. Citizens’ communities emerge as the true engine of innovation and therefore the chapter outlines how to translate the “community network vision” into design principles and implementation guidelines.

Introduction

The first Italian community networks were conceived and designed in 1993-94 during a unique period in our country’s history. In 1992 and 1993 a group of public prosecutors from the Milan court — called the “Clean Hands” Pool — revealed the corruption that had characterized Italian democracy since the end of the Second World War. Italy had been frozen for 45 years by a set of political parties that consisted of the two major parties (the Christian Democrats, who had led the national government since 1948 without interruption, and the Communist Party, which was constantly in opposition during the period) that were surrounded by a few satellite parties. Among these, the Socialist Party acquired a major role during the eighties. In the 1993-1994 period, most of the outstanding statesmen were indicted and, in many cases, imprisoned. The political class was undergoing radical change, while civil society—known in those days as the “fax people” because its voice was heard through the faxes people sent to the newspapers—asked to play a greater role. These events transported the country from the First to the Second Italian Republic.

The promoters and designers of the early community networks (Milan, launched in September 1994; Bologna, active in January 1995), because of their personal history, not only technicians, but also were well aware of this socio-political context. They conceived of the Net as a way for giving voice — more than faxes can — to those who never had a chance to play a role in the civic and political arena. The Net was seen as a way for contrasting a *closed* Italian society, dominated by the “membership” culture (I trust only those in my own “church”: a party, a group within it; my identity is rooted in the group I belong to). This “membership culture” and its consequences are well described in Colombo (1996) with a virtual world, *open* according to the Internet tradition. The Net is therefore conceived as a new *tool*, which may open *new domains of possibility* to everybody, and, even more, as a kind of *new world* to be colonized possibly better (more open) than the real one.

In other words, the goal of opening the Milan and Bologna community networks was not simply to give access to all, but, by doing so, to take a step toward reinventing citizenship and democracy. Probably, there was also an intuition of the role network communities can play. These nets were imitated by several other towns, where other people shared the same goals: using the Net to enhance citizen participation in the *res publica*. In order to make this participation effective, it is of course necessary to involve public institutions and force them to use the Net to experiment with new forms of communication between administrators and citizens, electors and the elected.

Five years later, it is now possible to sum up a very first attempt: do the several community networks confirm the original “vision”? Do they suggest general guidelines for pursuing that vision? The goal of this chapter is to discuss these points. But it is worth remarking that, even though five years seems long, tiring, and stressing to those who have carried on day-to-day management of these initiatives, it is also a very short time for the design and implementation of such complex socio-technical systems, and for driving ultimate conclusions over such an ambitious dream. This is why we call them *early* experiences.

After a presentation of a few experiences — those the author has been directly involved in or knows best — the chapter discusses the root of the vision, so to speak, i.e., why one can assume that the Net may support reinventing citizenship and democracy. This is followed by a summary of these early experiences in terms of the original goal. On this basis, a section is presented that outlines some design principles to (re)orient further developments toward approaching the original goal.

A Short Introduction to Community Networking in Italy (and Europe)

This section gives a short presentation of community networking, starting from Italy, with a few references to the other European experiences. The aim is by no means a complete survey, but rather to focus on certain characteristics that are well worth presenting to aid in subsequent discussion of citizenship and democracy issues. We will use “local computer network,” as a generic term denoting any telematic initiative rooted in a geographical area, typically around a town.

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