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Chapter XI

Community Informatics for Electronic Democracy: Social Shaping of the Digital City in Antwerp (DMA)

Jo Pierson[1]
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Introduction[2]

People living together in harmonious communities is the primary goal of most modern societies. The way these communities are built depends on the ideas, values and ideals of the society in which it is carried out. Campfens discerns two perspectives:

> "From a humanitarian perspective, it may be seen as a search for community, mutual aid, social support, and human liberation in an alienating, oppressive, competitive, and individualistic society. In its more pragmatic institutional sense, it may be viewed as a means for mobilizing communities to join state or institutional initiatives that are aimed at alleviating poverty, solving social problems, strengthening families, *fostering democracy*, and achieving modernization and socio-economic development" (1997: 25).

Yet any community is only viable when all members can communicate with each other. Nowadays, the possible ways of communication have expanded enormously, especially since the convergence of informatics and telecommunication into information and communication technologies (ICT) offers a powerful tool.

The expansion of new means for communication like the Internet can thus be used for supporting communities in their efforts for social, economic or political development. This refers to the concept of 'Community Informatics' (CI). CI is defined as:

> "an approach that starts from the perspective that ICT can provide a set of resources and tools so that communities and individuals living in

> communities can use ICT to pursue their goals in such areas as local economic development, cultural affairs, civic activism, community-based health and environment initiatives and so on." (Gurstein & Dienes, 1999)

Furthering the well being and welfare of a community through the development and use of ICT can thus be seen as a basic aim of CI. In this chapter we examine the political viewpoint, which entails the feasibility of promoting the democratic processes in a (municipal) community by means of ICT.

ICT and Democracy

It is generally accepted that ICT have the capacity of organizing virtual democratic processes like information exchange, interaction with local officials, public debate or even voting. ICT applications that enable these kinds of activities contribute to a so-called 'electronic democracy.' Related concepts are 'digital city,' 'cyberdemocracy,' 'teledemocracy,' 'push-button democracy' or 'point-and-click democracy,' dependent on the (utopian or dystopian) labels attached to it (Brants, Huizinga & van Meerten, 1996, 233). These kind of technological services, inspired by socio-political motives, rely on a community-based information network. The purpose and the democratic potential of such a network depends on the initiating actors and their motives and values (Arterton, 1987).

Based on an analysis of a broad range of citizen networks or community-based information networks, Friedland (1996) discerns four broad network models that can overlap. Besides 'advocacy networks' and 'electronic public journalism' he also distinguishes networks that are driven by technology in local or regional communities, the so-called 'community networks.' The latter refers to CI initiatives like Freenets (free networks), civic networks and community bulletin boards. They generally pursue goals in areas of civic activism, on-line public debate and advocacy. This concept has also found its way to Europe, with the 'De Digitale Stad' (DDS) in Amsterdam as a prominent example.

However the model most relevant for our analysis refers to the networks which have grown out of broadly defined governmental or local planning activity. Because the local governments often hold many powers, as the Belgians do, some relevant democratic innovations have come from local governments in new forms of economic planning and community development. This model of 'government-community economic development' applies to most current digital cities initiatives in Europe. In general they take the initiative of providing public information and services by means of ICT in order to optimize the communication and information exchange with citizens and the local representative democracy. However despite the rhetoric, one can question to what degree these kind of top-down initiatives really succeed in deepening democratic processes in a community, as envisaged by CI.

Digital Cities in Belgium

Belgium and Flanders have no tradition regarding public funding of community access. In comparison to other countries there is a lack of national and regional public support for societal and community projects regarding ICT (see, e.g., Pierson, 1997). Consequently the support depends largely on the willingness and the efforts

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