



Chapter XXII

Community and Technology: Social Learning in CCIS

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Introduction

This chapter outlines the development of a community information service in the Southeast of Scotland — the Craigmillar Community Information Service (CCIS). It develops a socio-technical analysis of the development of the service and draws out some potential lessons regarding the development of community identity through the use and application of ICTs. What we present here is not intended to be a model which others should follow — it is our belief that each implementation of ICTs in the community is unique, and that the same is true of the solutions. Rather we aim to highlight some problems and their local solutions in the hope that community information services can find something of value for their work.

The Social Shaping Thesis

It is important to examine the ways in which society and technology exist in a relationship of mutual shaping — no technology, however powerful, completely configures its users. Rather technology is a component of a larger picture that includes the efforts of promoters, users, regulators, legislators and others to both extend and constrict the uses and meanings accorded a technology within a given societal context. As Williams and Edge point out:

Every stage in the generation and implementation of new technologies involves a set of choices between different technical options. Alongside narrowly 'technical' considerations, a range of 'social' factors affect which options are selected — thus influencing the content of technologies, and their social implications. (1996, p. 866)

Williams and Edge note that social shaping should not be taken as if it were an inversion of the technological determinism — social shaping attends to 'the complexity of socioeconomic processes involved in technological innovation' (idem). The trajectory that technologies take does not reflect a unitary discourse —

they are driven by a multiplicity of competing and often contradictory discourses and attendant choices. ‘Significantly, these choices could have differing implications for society and for particular social groups. The character of technologies as well as their social implications are opened up for enquiry’ (idem).

Using the social shaping thesis, we can see that technologies such as CCIS are *negotiable* — that is, what a technology comes to be is the result of a complex series of interactions originating in different groups (suppliers, users, managers, community groups, other projects). No one group has primacy, although some discourses might be more powerful than others (regulators, funders) and will shape the technology in certain ways. Williams and Edge point to the ways in which the choices made earlier in a technologies’ history serve to constrict the potentialities that are available later. For example there are extant models of what a community ICT service can be (in terms of scope, technology, democratic intent and content — see, for example Schuler, 1996); there are regulations as to what is fundable by grant awarding bodies and also timetables in which remits have to be attained. As we shall see, each of these plays a part in constraining what CCIS *can* become. This does not mean that we should substitute a weaker form of determinism in terms of ‘lock in,’¹ but that we have to appreciate the impacts that choices (which are themselves products of socio-technical ensembles² [Bijker, 1993]) have.

Social Learning

The term ‘social learning’ originates in the constructive technology assessment approach advocated by Rip et al. (1995). It stems from an attempt to link evolutionary accounts of technological development with those from a social shaping perspective. The term attends to reflexive relations between technologies and social actors and the manner in which they come to practical choices about the uses of technologies in particular contexts. We have used the term to focus on the negotiated character of technological development wherein there is participation from a number of sources, and thereby a learning process which encompasses a diverse range of players in any given socio-technical ensemble. Social learning is praxiological — that is, people learn through doing. Sorensen (1996) has drawn out a series of categories of social learning upon which this paper draws. He notes that social learning can take place in terms of efforts to regulate, experiment and so on. We can see how the players in any given setting learn from each other and how this has an impact on the technology and what it can/will become. The studies from which this case was taken were made across the EU, and focus on the various forms of regulation and development of technologies and actor constituencies together with the ways each impacts on the other.³

We look at the development of CCIS as an example of social learning in that the extant models of digital communities, the work of local community groups, users of technology and funders were brought into play in the development of the service. That is to say, the service did not simply develop for example as a result of the availability of the technology or the will of society, but was the result of a reflective dialogue with various actors and technologies as to what the service could be which changed over time. Social learning directs us to a diachronic and dialogic development of socio-technical ensembles — new questions, new problems, new possibilities and new solutions open up over time. New knowledge accrues as a result of these

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