

Chapter 8

Social Cohesion and Free Home Internet in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses community outcomes of free home Internet access. It draws on case study research on Computers in Homes (CIH), a scheme established in New Zealand in 2000 for the purpose of bridging the digital divide, particularly for low-income families who have school-aged children. The government-funded CIH scheme aims to strengthen relationships between families and schools, improve educational outcomes for children, and provide greater opportunities for their parents. CIH achieves this by working with many primary (elementary) schools, each of which selects 25 families who will benefit from the program. Each family receives a refurbished computer, software, and six months free Internet, as well as twenty hours of free IT training and technical support so that all adults are equipped to make effective use of the Internet. The scheme has evolved to deliver much more than technology. It has become a contributor to social capital in the communities where it has been established. This chapter uses a case study research approach to demonstrate and theorize this process of community building using a construct of social cohesion, which appears to be strengthened by the CIH intervention. Where stronger social networks, volunteerism, and civic engagement were documented in the research, leader figures also mobilized to act on shared goals. These findings highlight the value of existing social resources within communities for achieving community goals while also maximizing community Internet longevity.

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INTRODUCTION

The information revolution is changing the way many of us live and work; yet digital inclusion remains a pressing issue at the heart of a socially inclusive society based in the information age. It is imperative to ensure that no one gets left behind, but despite being a more economically developed nation New Zealand (NZ) does have poor and disadvantaged communities, and digital inequality. The image of egalitarianism and inclusive opportunity in NZ is less robust when examined closely; in fact the most recent household economic survey shows “inequality ...rose from 2010 to 2011 to its highest level ever” (Perry, 2012, p. 1). With respect to global ranking of technological readiness - the capacity to fully benefit from information and communication technologies that enhance the nation’s competitiveness and the daily lives of citizens - NZ appears comparatively well off, being listed at number 18 out of 138 countries in 2011 (Dutta & Mia, 2011, p. 230). Yet, acute disparities in digital opportunity continue to exist. In a nation of slightly more than 4 million people in 2006, 116,000 households with school-aged children remained without Internet access at home (Statistics New Zealand, 2012). In the wake of the more recent global economic recession, income and other gaps such as health and education are widening sharply (Collins, 2012), making the need for targeted efforts to promote digital opportunity even more acute.

This chapter discusses community outcomes of free home Internet access in the Computers In Homes (CIH) scheme. This scheme was created for the purpose of overcoming the social and economic consequences of an emerging digital divide, an issue that has been a focus of attention for NZ politicians, policy makers and practitioners, just as it has been a global issue from the late 1990s. CIH was founded in early trials in 1996 in Wellington, NZ’s capital city, which already had an established history of successful community-based ICT projects (Newman, 2008,

p. 3; Zwimpfer, 2010), and it thrives today with a mission “to provide all NZ families, who are socially and economically disadvantaged, with a computer, an Internet connection, relevant training and technical support” (Computers in Homes, 2011, p. 2). By 2000, the CIH scheme was being developed further and piloted by the 2020 Communications Trust, a charitable organization that wanted to develop a successful community Internet model aimed at raising the literacy level of children from low decile¹ schools. Its purpose was to “promote dialogue and understanding through local action” (2020 Communications Trust, 2009), to provide leadership in ICT and deliver programs that address issues of digital literacy, skills and inclusion.

The non-profit 2020 Communications Trust has achieved this through partnerships with national and local government agencies and businesses to obtain funding for its activities. The Trust identifies gaps in digital inclusion in NZ communities, devises possible approaches and then seeks to partner with other agents to take action. CIH is managed within this context and has become a key intervention program in the 2020 Trust’s line-up of initiatives. In 1999, the 2020 Communications Trust began to draw together sponsors and partners who could collaborate to provide the resources to begin work in the pilot CIH communities. These partners included Computer Access NZ (CANZ), an agency set up by the 2020 Trust to access and refurbish used computers to an as-new standard. This was necessary because of the cost of new computers for low decile schools, which

*...can be beyond the resources of cash-strapped schools and not-for-profit community organisations. To help solve the problem, the Computer Access NZ Trust (CANZ) was set up in 1999. It was an initiative of the **2020 Communications Trust**, supported by the Ministry of Education. CANZ accredits **computer-refurbishing companies**, which use the CANZ quality brand...Accredited refurbishers sell used equipment donated by com-*

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