

Reinventing Community Networks as Economic Development Solutions

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O P I N I O N

Networks exist in all our communities, small or large. But what are the key challenges facing the development of online community networks, and are they the solution to economic development in our rural and urban communities?

The history of community networking can be characterised as being the era when early adopters with a vision for their communities created online collaborative systems intended to empower a majority of the local community, but found themselves unable to capture the imaginations and participation of more than a small number of citizens. Many were dismayed into thinking that perhaps online networking would not work. The digital divide was the most common excuse used as a tool to blame the lack of effectiveness of online communities. This article argues that simply access is not the key to such community networks, as creating value is the key.

Communities meeting and coalescing is nothing new, ask any anthropologist. But the proliferation and use of ICTs to facilitate this is a new phenomenon. Since the 1980s of the hundreds of innovative community networking projects which have been created over the past decade most proved unable to inspire a growing number of citizens without the support and validation of the existing community leadership and media. The politics of control have limited public perception of the profoundly empowering collaborative community Internet applications that are possible.

In both urban and rural communities we have a new need for new knowledge on an ongoing basis to keep from falling further behind in a world of accelerating change. Growing civic intelligence requires new community learning systems. Community innovation systems are needed to stimulate widespread innovations. Local grassroots champions are often “prophets without honour in their home lands.” How can we reach the point where the majority consensus finally accepts the validity of their visions and innovations? To realise the



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greatest potential for community networking the ongoing support of both the media, and our leadership at all levels is fundamentally necessary.

Now that we’ve had over a decade to become familiar with the Internet, the evolutionary process of creating widespread awareness of common sense community Internet applications appears to be at an important turning point. Costs for computer and Internet access have steadily declined and Internet speeds have steadily increased. The author lives in broadband Britain, and as costs become lower there is no doubt that more and more of British society will have access to the fastest connection speeds available. Today, we in Britain are seeing rapidly growing Internet applications in all sectors of commerce and society.

The dramatic economic decline of rural areas in the developed world in America and in the UK in particular has created new pressures to find innovative solutions. Our past economy depended primarily on big corporations, but today

the reverse is true, the real growth is in micro-enterprises. Our key developable resource is the learning potential of each and every citizen.

E-commerce is steadily being re-recognized as a viable option to tap into global markets. Outsourcing jobs to India has certainly validated tele-work. The U.S. government has passed legislation to dramatically promote tele-work for federal employees. Here in the UK we are constantly finding more and more jobs being shipped abroad via the call centre revolution. Individual entrepreneurs using eBay number up to 114 million, now too many to ignore, exchanging 28 billion in goods per year, with 430,000 persons self-employed full-time using eBay.

Rural communities around the world, many now with equal Internet access to American communities are aggressively embracing their newfound global market potential. No longer do U.S. communities enjoy a ten-year first-to-market advantage of local Internet access over our global rural competition.

Awareness is steadily growing that if we were all able to share a common vision and pull together, great things are truly possible. The barn-raising metaphor fits here, as web-raising could be held with everyone working together to share that new knowledge most needed to deal with accelerating change. Creating communities that can learn to competently manage new knowledge on an ongoing basis, to become real learning communities, has become both necessary and viable.

The key lesson we can draw from the evolution of community networking projects is that “The devil is in the details!” It won’t happen based on good intentions alone, but only through care-

ful planning and widespread authentic community collaboration at all levels.

Return on Investment

The challenge for community networks continues to be the incentive for participation. Individuals need to be willing to commit their time based on the personal satisfaction that their donated time produces real value and is socially recognized. Value needs to be quantified as a visible measurable outcome that can be celebrated. "Less is more" in the age of information overload. Having everyone create a personal web log is not necessarily the answer.

Information condenses to knowledge which condenses to wisdom, and value is created in the age of information overload.

Once the process of creating value is demonstrated, two key issues arise:

1. Which tools and specific best practices produce the greatest value leveraging the time and energy of citizens? In other words, "What applications produce the greatest value 'return on investment' for time and effort?"

2. How are citizens most effectively engaged in sustained collaborative learning activities to produce steadily greater value per time invested as they increase their skills and knowledge regarding the diverse tools and proven best practices?

This is a double-barrelled opportunity, creating a progressively more powerful community skills base that produces exponentially greater value as more citizens contribute by collaboratively sharing new knowledge. We need to quantify the effectiveness of the successive levels of tools and best practices with an eye toward the accelerating evolution of more diverse and powerful applications.

The authenticity of genuine participation will be measured by the demonstration of effective training coupled with rather immediate visible outcomes everyone can understand and celebrate. The challenge will be to demonstrate the most effective use of volunteered time to create the most outstanding resources providing the greatest possible benefit to others. Whether the first successful models come from foreign communities or from our own, is up to us. It is just a matter of who and when.

A case study: Donnie Morrison, a grass-roots champion of the Outer Hebrides Islands in Northern Scotland, saw dwindling populations in his regional communities. Young people were moving away, schools were losing students, the local economies were dying. Donnie was successful in bringing high speed Internet to his communities and high-paying tele-work jobs, and today the communities are once again healthy and growing. (See <http://www.work-global.com>) By Donnie's own report, his most successful innovation and key to his success was his creation of a community skills registry database.

The questions we're at last starting to ask are "What's the best our community can do for itself based on new knowledge of the best successful innovations already working for other communities?" What does our community do to inhibit innovations? and what have other communities done successfully to encourage and support innovation?

The challenge faced potentially by all communities is "What's the best way to routinely gather and share the best innovations as they emerge to benefit all communities?"

The questions we need to ask of our communities is not simply how many people will they put online, but what value will they create. Imagine inner city areas forming their own online skills communities, the disadvantaged would be given a global voice in the information world and who is to say that through collaboration their skills set doesn't rise to put them on a par in the global market for outsourcing.

We hear so much talk of the digital divide, and how to bridge it. In a recent study undertaken in Leeds it was evident that community networks harnessing social and cultural capital were the biggest determinants for success or failure in the digital divide when looking at the socially excluded. If we are harnessing these networks for aiding people to learn, then there is no reason that we cannot harness these networks for community economic development. The questions we have to ask ourselves are:

- Are all local business web sites listed in one place to support local online shopping and to generate awareness as to which local businesses are now doing business on the Internet?

- Are all local e-commerce support

businesses listed in one place so anyone can easily find the expertise they need to bring their business online?

- Are local experts and community mentors celebrated for the value they bring to the community and listed where people can find them?

- Does your local media regularly celebrate local e-commerce success stories? Or are they ignored?

- Are successful innovations from similar communities to yours readily shared locally by any means?

- Are entry-level e-commerce education training opportunities (such as eBay) and peer mentoring programs readily available in your community?

Answering yes to as many of the above questions is a clear indicator that things are on the right track. In an age of global competitiveness we need to harness not all the skills of the individual but the skills of the collective. The unlocked potential of inner city areas is huge, and now the tools are there to take this forward. Let us see soon the likes of inner city Leeds take on New York in the e-commerce revolution, or London take on Delhi – and of course win. What is clear is that the benefits of online collaboration in both rural and urban areas aren't harnessed enough. Capturing the imagination of policy makers to support such networks might be the catalyst for change.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harinder Mann is a PhD candidate in the Department of Information Systems. His research has included a two and a half year study of the digital divide in an inner city area. He teaches on the ADMIS course and is a previous graduate of ADMIS (2000). His research areas include the effects of ICTs on the disadvantaged and ICTs for development in the context of UK.