Hot-wiring community

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ABSTRACT

In response to the 'digital divide', national and local governments in the UK, the US and Australia have embarked on various initiatives designed to promote the use of computer networks in low-income communities. These initiatives involve common models of self-help and mutual obligation; the pattern is one where government provides seed funding to encourage public-private partnerships between disadvantaged communities, businesses, philanthropists and universities. Together they rig up a solution to information poverty, giving people access to information technologies in their homes. The idea is that people will be better able to share resources, find work, acquire qualifications, help themselves and trust one another. Already, however, the reality has fallen short of expectations. It taken a long time for technical experimentation to find success; often, meanwhile, the public-private partnership model has broken down. More importantly for broader social policy discussion, there is a prevailing confusion about whether the focus should be on employment, education and training outcomes, or on more diffuse ideas about social cohesion. This paper reviews international examples of success and failure in building wired communities, putting the case for a stronger focus on self-education, informal learning and employment outcomes rather than on community-building and social cohesion.

1. Introduction

This paper reviews recent research on three broadly comparable wired community initiatives, in Melbourne, Boston and across England. While their histories, organisational circumstances and initial effect vary, they have a number of features in common. First, each is configured as an initiative run by community groups and not for profit agencies, with support from university researchers and with cash or in-kind assistance from regional or national governments and from the private sector, especially from technology companies. Each appeals to 'whole of government' thinking, linking reform initiatives in local government, housing departments, education bureaucracies and information policy agencies. Each depends on substantial investment, while aiming to develop a self-sustaining local enterprise, with the potential to solve long-standing social welfare problems. My interest is in the terms in which the organisers, funders and supporters understand the transformative potential of wired community initiatives. Focusing on the political vocabulary used in project plans and progress reports, I draw out the ways in which community networks, social partnership and community-building work as a governmental technology. I argue that we should be moderate, though, in claiming that such examples indicate the politically transformative effects of the social use of technology. To pursue this proposition, we turn to the first of our case studies, the 'e-ACE' initiative at Atherton Gardens in Melbourne.

2. An Australian wired community venture: e-ACE

The e-ACE project, or 'Reach for the Clouds' as it was originally named by its organisers, stemmed from the activity of InfoXchange, a Melbourne-based not for profit community technology enterprise.[1] InfoXchange has had a strong record of providing Internet services, data bases and web design to community groups; it also developed Green PC, a successful venture to work with long-term unemployed people to recondition donated personal computers that would otherwise be landfill, reselling the equipment at cost to the community sector, or donating them to low income people.[2] Out of this scheme developed the plan to give all residents of a local high-rise housing estate PCs and to convince the Victorian Office of Housing to rewire the four tower blocks of the Atherton Gardens complex in Fitzroy, an estate consisting of 800 apartments, largely occupied by low income people, primarily unemployed and predominantly immigrants from Vietnam, China and at least 30 other countries of origin. The aim, according to the original outlines of the project, was to bridge the digital divide, to build skills and employment prospects, to promote social cohesion and community-building and ultimately, to establish a resident-owned and resident-run wired community (InfoXchange 1999, 2000; Meredyth et al 2002).

This plan, first developed in 1999, was eventually successful. Following concerted lobbying from InfoXchange, in tandem with community groups and local government, and with support from private sector partners including Microsoft, the Victorian state government provided substantial funding towards the rewiring of the buildings (see Ewing et al 2003). The rollout of computers and cabling continued throughout 2002 and the e-ACE network will shortly be launched.[3] It will contain content provided by local social services and businesses, including information on housing, health and social welfare services, as well as local activities and community resources. Residents who have

[1] See http://www.infoxchange.net.au/index.html
[2] See http://www.greenpc.com.au/
[3] See http://www.atherton.org.au/

received computers – about 400 of them so far – have also completed training courses. They will have access, in their homes, to a reconditioned machine, software, email and a subsidised Internet connection, as well as access to the e-ACE intranet and to a common training room on the estate, where classes are being held throughout the week. InfoXchange is still seeking further funding to expand its training provisions.

Meanwhile, a team of researchers from the Institute for Social Research (myself, Julian Thomas, Scott Ewing, Liza Hopkins, Alison Jarman and David Hayward) are tracking the progress and social impact of the project, with support from the ARC. Most of the proponents, partners and supporters of the e-ACE initiative have been interviewed, as part of a continuing analysis of the rationales and expectations involved in this social partnership enterprise. An initial interview-based survey of the residents has also been carried out, where possible in the native language of the main groups on the estate; this will be repeated in a year's time. The results, it is hoped, will show the extent to which the e-ACE network has made a difference to residents' technology skills, attitudes to computers and the Internet, employment and education prospects, access to news, information on social services and their ability to stay in touch with friends and family. We have also asked a range of questions about patterns of community contact in and around the estate, about the extent of residents' contact with neighbours, friends and family, about the degree to which they know and trust their neighbours and are involved in decision-making on the estate, and about their attitudes to Atherton Gardens as a place to live.

Our initial results indicate that residents have high employment, education and training needs, that they are eager for educational opportunities and see the e-ACE network as a way to obtain these for themselves and their children and that they are keen to learn how to use computers to find work (ISR 2003a, 2003b; Meredyth and Ewing 2003). Although residents are generally positive about the Atherton Gardens estate and the community resources available to them, and although many appear to be well connected and active in local groups and activities, they feel insecure on the estate, and few trust their neighbours. The general profile is one of significant social and economic disadvantage and some social isolation. Security on the estate is a problem, and Atherton Gardens has long been perceived as a focus for drug trading and domestic and other forms of violence. The e-ACE network is one of a number of initiatives currently focused on these problems, within an array of neighbourhood renewal and community-building programs run by various bodies but coordinated by the state government (see Ewing 2003).

The Atherton Gardens case study offers, then, an example of a current Australian effort to establish a wired community as a way of 'retooling' community. Following the pattern of neoliberal government through community, it is not a government-led initiative. Government agencies have however provided funding, tied to performance measures and outcomes, assessed by university research. The agents responsible for the venture are from the community, not for profit and voluntary sectors, with cash and in kind support from private companies. In order to be credible and sustainable, the organisers need to involve the tenants themselves, as individuals and households willing to be part of the network and training activities, and as a body that can be consulted and that can take ownership of the content provided by the network and, eventually, of the running of the network itself. Sustaining these partnerships and engendering involvement across the range of people living on the estate involves a considerable challenge.

Even at this early stage of the project, it is clear that the organisers and funders have very different and sometimes competing conceptions of the purpose and significance of the project and of what would constitute success (Hopkins et al 2003). For InfoXchange, the main point of the project is to give computer and Internet access to people who have been caught on the wrong side of the digital divide. What people do with the technology and information resources once they have access to them is up to them, though the hope is that the residents will be able and interested enough to get involved in sharing their skills and making the network into an enterprise that opens education and employment opportunities, including the possibilities of making the network pay for itself, as residents develop and promote their skills, either as IT technicians in some cases or as translators, for example. This is the model of the resident-owned and resident-run network, and it has been highly attractive to funders, since it can be pitched in terms of community-building and neighbourhood renewal, thus meeting funding priorities (see Ewing 2003, Ewing et al 2003).

The government funders have their own concerns, nevertheless. From the point of view of the Office of Housing, for instance, or the local government partner the City of Yarra, the project is attractive in that it offers a way to get information to housing estate residents, including information about social services and activities of these agencies (Hopkins et al 2003). At the same time, it offers a way to seek information on the profile, needs and requirements of the tenants themselves. The e-ACE project tallies with many of the institutional goals of these agencies, especially since it is a local enterprise, involving self-help and participation from tenants and community-groups, with a strong focus on capacity building and skills, rather than dependency on welfare services. Some of our interviewees recalled, though, that the project initially looked like a risky bet: it was unclear whether government agencies would be able to maintain a clear distance as sponsors, if the project was a failure, or was seen to lead to undesirable social outcomes, such as online gambling.

Interestingly, the most cautious and sceptical assessments of the project have come from within the community and not for profit sector partners. One interviewee, for instance, regarded InfoXchange's scheme as a 'top-down' initiative, insufficiently grounded in community-based decision making and participation, and liable to failure for that reason. From the perspective of community workers confronting the effects of intergenerational poverty, illiteracy, lack of English and alienation, in an environment where a broken lift, violence in the corridor and discarded needles on the stairs pose immediate problems, giving residents free computers and expecting them to use the technology might seem quixotic: as one interviewee put it, it can seem like a 'space age' idea for a 'stone age' context (Hopkins 2003). Certainly the complex social and cultural composition of the residents themselves is likely to defeat any expectation that the 'community' will use the network to knit itself together into a cohesive social body stocking up social capital (cf. Wellman et al 2001)

While many of the residents are extremely enthusiastic about the e-ACE initiative, and eager to make use of computers and the Internet, especially with their children, they are not noticeably keen to get more involved in decision-making on the estate. The emerging pattern is one in which existing groups on the estate, primarily language groups, are likely to have more to do with one another, both online and face to face, as the network establishes itself and as training activities take off. Whether this will lead to greater trust

and co-operation on the estate remains to be seen. Although terms such as community building and social capital have been effective in engendering support for the project, these may not be the main terms in which its social and economic effects are calculated in the end.

Unanimity and organic evolution is hardly to be expected in a venture as complex as this. Nevertheless, the example is already serving to show that the process of translation between the concerns of interest groups is often faulty and hard to fix. This is not a simple case where technology use, expertise and social entrepreneurialism provides a relay between governmental objectives and communities of interest. It is a complex instance of the labour of negotiation involved in social administration.

If our broader purpose is to understand the relationship between new technologies, political rationalities and the mechanisms of neoliberal government, the Atherton Gardens experiment might seem like a good case for claiming that technology has a transformational role. At first glance, it looks like we are seeing a smooth relay of reciprocal change: government seeks to 'retool' communities, while government is re-engineered, using new technologies to act more effectively at a distance.

A closer look at the work on the ground, though, moderates this account of transformation. The problems associated with public housing, local government and social welfare have hardly been altered by either the technology itself or the governmental technology of social partnership. It is still remarkably difficult for either government agencies or community agencies to obtain accurate information about who currently lives in the Atherton Gardens housing estate, about what they live on or what their needs are. It is still hard for tenants to get accurate information from agencies about what they are entitled to and what they are supposed to do in order to get social support. Use of online information systems and data retrieval may make these exchanges of information faster, but they may not be more accurate or more flexible. Much still depends on the mundane labour of planning and negotiation, advocacy and arbitration.

3. International wired community experiments

The Atherton Gardens wired community experiment is still unique in Australia, though comparable ventures are being planned. It has much in common, though, with at least two international initiatives, in the US and the UK. In these cases, too, organisers have sought to give low income and isolated people access to computers and connectivity, on the assumption that they will be better able to become smooth operators in a world of online services and information. And in these cases, as with the e-ACE example, sophisticated plans and schema for transforming communities have been articulated by activists, entrepreneurs and philanthropists, and sold on to private sector partners and government sponsors. In each case, the enthusiasm for community and participation has waned, as organisers have met indifference or grappled with gritty reality of holding social partnerships together.

The first instance, from the US, is the Camfield Estates/MIT Creating Community Connections Project.[4] This is a community technology and community building project based in Boston. MIT has established a community network giving computers

[4] See http://www.camfieldestates.net/ and http://web.media.mit.edu/~rpinkett/papers/camfield-mit.html

and high speed Internet connections to all families living in a housing development in South End/Roxbury. The families, of whom there are a little more than a hundred, are primarily African-American and are on low to moderate incomes. The scheme offers them some training and access to a community technology centre on the estate and to a community-based web system (C3), which compiles information on the 'commercial, associational and institutional assets' within the community. Co-designed by MIT and the residents, C3 offers online access to profiles of all residents, to a database on local businesses and community organisations, to geographic information system (GIS) maps, discussion forums, news and announcements, email lists and chat rooms. C3 is conceived as an online resource for building social capital. It is designed 'to create connections in the community between residents, local associations and institutions (e.g. libraries, schools, etc.) and neighbourhood businesses' (Pinkett 2002 p. 2). [5]

Randall Pinkett, the charismatic MIT-based architect of the Camfield Estates project, presents it as a continuation of nineteenth century efforts to 'revitalise America's distressed communities and fight the war on poverty' (Pinkett 2002 p. 1). American communities are riven by the gap between rich and poor, bisected by racial and ethnic difference. On the Camfield Estate, where households are generally headed by single, Black/African-American mothers, there is the chance to make community members active agents of change. Using computers and online resources, they can be encouraged to find resources in the local area, to share skills and help one another to build up local assets of knowledge, skill and information. Once they have the information about these resources, they can begin to leverage their own creative skills and problem-solving abilities, reselling them as commercial assets. Rather than being passive consumers, they can become producers of information and content (Pinkett 2002, p. 12). The university has a role in this; it is part of the (self-generating) community, but also part of the (self-regulating) market in skill exchange and services.

Pinkett contends that community technology has transformed the estate; the infrastructure has brought about a "cultural shift, or re-orientation" towards both technology use and community connection. He offers some inspiring examples of how residents moved from indifference and suspicion of technology to enthusiasm and community connectedness. His central story is that of "Edna Jackson", a formidable resident who initially opposed the project, but who was converted to computer use and the Internet when someone showed her how to use the computers to stay in touch with her family, and to investigate her health problems (Pinkett 2002b p.1). On the day when she made a comment to an online chat room for cancer survivors, and was validated by the others, "everything changed"; she had a "renewed faith in her capacity to learn" and experienced a "metacognitive shift". She found a 'community of interest ' and made global ties with a community that "reached out to her", giving her better quality of life.

This is the most positive story of personal transformation. It matches the earliest hopes of the MIT organisers – like InfoXchange in the Australian case, they hoped to see the enterprise owned and run by community leaders and committed individuals (Pinkett 2000). In the event, it took much labour and persuasion at the 'grassroots' to get families on the estate involved. Out of 80 eligible families, 59 eventually agreed to be given a computer and to use the network (Pinkett 2002 p. 9). Twenty-six per cent were not

[5] C3 uses ArsDigita Community System, an open-source software platform. See Pinkett 2002.

involved; reasons given included having too many responsibilities, having health conditions or simply not being interested (Pinkett 2002 p. 9).

For the organisers, this has presented something of a problem, since their conception of the community network goes well beyond technology access to a model where social capital and cohesion is built up through technology use – computer use and the compiling of data and models should bring awareness of skills, abilities and resources in the community; in turn the exchange of resources should build trust, promote a sense of obligation and extend both the strong and weak ties within the community (cf. Putnam, Granovetter, Hopkins 2002). Instead, however, it appears that online exchanges tend to either replace existing face to face interactions in the community or to extend them, rather than 'reconfigure' them. This has meant that, in the few years of its operation, the Camfield Estates experiment has not shown a pattern of improvement in community interaction and local activity, or measurable increases in trust and social capital; the relationship between community technology and community building remains unclear (Pinkett 2002b). Pinkett concludes that "community building for the stake of community building will never be enough (much like access for the sake of access is never enough)". Nevertheless, he is unshaken in his commitment to motivate community members, to "get people to want to integrate both technology and community building into their daily lives" (Pinkett 2002b).

We can see a similar pattern of reforming aspiration and disappointment in our third example, that of the Wired Up Communities scheme developed in England by the national English Department for Education and Skills.[6] The scheme differs from both the Australian and the American example in being initiated and funded by government. Ten million pounds sterling has been given to seed-fund public-private partnerships designed to give residents in disadvantaged communities high-speed access to the Internet, from their homes. According to the education department, the initiative is designed to test 'how new technology can help break down barriers which people face in getting and keeping a job". Individual Internet access in the home can 'transform opportunities', developing 'new ways of accessing learning, work and leisure services'. [7]

The Wired Up Communities scheme has now been in development for two years. Following a pilot project in a wired community in Kensington, Liverpool, DfES put out a call inviting socially disadvantaged communities to organise themselves into public-private partnerships with technology companies and not for profit agencies and to propose an experiment in wiring a community. There are seven initiatives now in place, using a variety of means to link computers in people's homes to the Internet and local networks of schools and social services; the technical models include the use of both reconditioned and new PCs and of set top boxes and televisions; connectivity is being achieved through standard telephone lines, through broadband and through satellite TV.[8] The local initiatives now in place include the Newham estate in East London, perhaps the closest in circumstances to our two previous examples.[9] Once again, it features a resident population that is multiethnic, low-income and largely unemployed. Each of these households has been pledged a set top box and cable connection to Internet services. However, construction of this particular wired community experiment has fallen well behind

[6] See http://www.dfes.gov.uk/wired/index.shtml
[7] See http://www.dfes.gov.uk/wired/over.shtml
[8] See 'Wired up communities' http://www.makingthenetwork.org/common/wuc.htm. Accessed 28/02/2003
[9] See http://www.newham.net/welcome.htm

schedule, in part because of difficulties in sustaining the partnership between the community agencies involved, the tenants themselves and the private technology company responsible to developing and installing the network.

These difficulties are characteristic; few of the funded wired-up communities projects across the UK have lived up to the expectations of organisers and the criteria of the funder. In the first concerted evaluation of the whole initiative, by a team from Leeds Metropolitan University, the problem appears, in part, to lie in the model of public-private partnership used (Devins et al 2003). A number of the initiative lost their private partner when, in the wake of the dotcom boom, small technology companies collapsed and went into receivership. Others found that the private sector partners were primarily interested in the opportunity for technological innovation, and were unable to grapple with the social context of the community technology venture or with the needs of local residents. Another important disappointment has been the lack of evidence that computer access in the home has been directly linked, via skill-building, to improved employment prospects. Although the computers are available and are being used, educational initiatives have been patchy. Residents tend to say they want educational opportunities, especially for their children, but they do not necessarily want to be involved in communal education activities; they prefer to pursue private concerns.

It is of course too early to tell what the longer-term costs and benefits of providing these computer networks will be. It may be that, as advocates and organisers claim, there is a causal chain between access to technology in the home, informal learning and experimentation and the pursuit of educational and employment opportunities, linked in turn to increased prosperity and thus to social cohesion. The problem, in evaluating short and medium term benefits, lies in tracking change and in demonstrating that it stems from the use of information and communication technologies. Already, there are cogent arguments, in Britain, against raising expectations about the social impact of wired communities too high, and investing too heavily in ventures with such uncertain outcomes (Wilcox et al 2002, Pleace and Quilgars 2002, Pearl and Scanlon 2002). A recent review of the relationship between public housing and community technology, published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, warns again ‘blundering in’ to invest in community technology for low income populations, especially where there is no clear strategy (Wilcox, Greenop and Mackie 2002). Often, it is argued, such initiatives cast up old problems with which the community sector has been working for decades. Organisers need to anticipate the thorny issue of how the resident community is going to be involved in the initiative, who speaks for which group and how decision-making is going to happen in often difficult and divisive issues, where there is no single community voice.

Together, then, these three wired community case studies help us to understand the complexity of the relationship between technology, community and governing aspirations. Each also offers reasons to avoid simple conceptions of community and mechanist understandings of the social impact of technology. Instead, they show how technology use is incorporated within the messy process of advocacy, investment and evaluation that now make up neoliberal ways of governing through community. While keyboards, screens, cables and data exchanges change some of the ways in which these processes happens, they are more likely to add to the everyday difficulties of managing life on and around a housing estate than to translate it into a new political reality.

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