Section 5 - *Virtual Communities*

Introduction

This section has been written by Dr. Mark Smith as a series of articles which explain how we can make use of web technologies to support community development work.

He starts with an introduction about providing information to people, the potential for community development and 'new' technologies and explores some common myths around the web.
The article on governance and virtual communities considers the role that ICT can play at every rung on the ladder of participation.
The article on techniques for on-line interaction offers a listing of the different techniques and what is involved.

The article on community engagement examines the differences between real time and virtual approaches to engaging with members of communities, and is followed by a summary of the pros and cons of different participation methods.

He offers a brief insight into some of the legal and access issues, and concludes the section by suggesting ways to develop on-line communities.

Contents - *Virtual Communities*

Mark Smith

E-GOVERNANCE AND BUILDING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES – 1

"The creation of a global fibre-optic network has made us all next door neighbours."

Friedman, T. (2005); The World is Flat; A Brief History of the Globalised World in the 21st Century

Introduction

Type in the word 'community' into a world wide web search engine and it will come up with 1,220,000,000 entries. Enter 'community development' in a UK only search and only 1.7 million websites are found. This raises the question – do communities and community workers need even more websites?

There are three ways of thinking about and using web technologies:

1. **People to information** – this is where it all started in the late 1960's – the Internet was created as a tool for people to gain access to research information.

2. **Information to people** – subtly different to the above, this implies the proactive distribution of information to people such that they get a 'personalised' experience – one where the content they get 'pushed' to them exactly matches their interests.

3. **People to people** – it seems obvious that when large groups of people are accessing data – that they themselves have a contribution to make. E-community takes advantage of the intellectual component that every community member provides. The web is an excellent vehicle for creating collaboration between community members.

The technology of 'virtual communities'

The vast majority of current web sites are information based – enabling visitors to download reports, data, booking forms for events and such like. This is particularly true of most 'official' community development sites. Yet, the web is increasingly being used to actively 'build communities'.

Such social media uses technology to enable individuals and groups to reach a worldwide audience immediately and is often referred as Web 2.0. – examples being YouTube, FaceBook and MySpace.

Whilst Web 1.0 was the use of the web by a few to publish content to the many, the concept of Web 2.0 is that it is based on user-generated content (UGC) and peer-to-peer publishing (or citizen journalism) using second generation web-based services such as blogs, wikis and social networks. Huge amounts of content (words, photos, videos, animation, sounds) are uploaded daily to such participation sites. These sites make it easy for people to connect seamlessly with those around them, publishing their views openly.

'New' software allows groups to create, visually, their own inter-active groups or communities – for example 'Second Life' – and the technology is constantly changing and developing.

Community development and the 'new' technologies'

At the core of community development are the principles of building networks, sharing information, ideas and skills and promoting participation. These, though contested, are the very principles driving social media technologies. Yet practitioners have been slow to 'exploit' information technology as a tool

for achieving community development goals. Several reasons have been given for this. This is at least in part a concern about the 'digital divide' between those with access to ICT and those without – but the gap is constantly narrowing and 2007 was the year when more people used their computers in the evening than watched TV.

The Web; Myths and Realities

Myth	Reality
The communities we work with have no access to ICT or the web	In 2006 more people in the UK spent more time on the internet than they did watching television. In April 2007 alone 24,832,552 households used the internet for an average of 34.4 hours per month. Over 63% of UK households have access to the internet at home – a figure that will increase with the introduction of digital TV technology.
Developing a website is difficult and expensive	Website templates and instructions on how to build a site can now be downloaded free – or instruction manuals and software bought in the high street at very low cost.
The web is only about individuals – not collective action	Web based technologies have been at the core of anti-globalisation campaigns and in building links – particularly in rural communities – between isolated individuals.

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E-GOVERNANCE AND BUILDING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES – 2

1. Government and virtual communities

The concept of e-government is well established – with Government targets set for Local Government and other statutory bodies in terms of;

- The nature and level of on-line data available to the public, for example electronic versions of key policy reports, local census data etc

- Services which can be accessed on line, for example payment of Council Tax Bills, Rents etc

- Electronic access to – and the ability to return official forms 'on line', for example Housing Benefit claims etc

The Government intends to extend e-voting and e-polling in time for the 2011 elections in England and Wales . But web based technology can be used for more than this and sits well with ideas of the different levels of participation.

2. ICT, e-governance and participation

The table below indicates how different levels of community participation can be related to ICT. The left hand column is based upon the ladder of participation created by Shelley Arnstein[1]

Level of participation	The use and role of ICT
Supporting	Examples of specialist/ ICT support networks in field of disability
Acting Together	Planning 'action' – eg World and European Social Forum/ new social movements (G8 and World Summit demonstrations in Prague and Seattle), Climate Justice camps
Deciding Together / Consultation	Online consultation / straw polls are common –see www. myfuturetoday.org.uk and the use of ICT 'votes' in tv/ radio competitions . A number of local authorities also have 'virtual' citizen panels with whom they consult on key local policy issues
Information	*Passive information* Posting reports etc. on a website without advance notice/'marketing' *Active information* Targeting groups/ individuals (eg through email alerts) pointing them to information relevant to their area of interest – eg – e-journal alerts; Local Government Association briefings. Profiling is key here – the best analogy is Tesco club cards – they do this to target customers based on information on previous purchasing patterns

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1 Arnstein, S.R., A Ladder of Citizen Participation, Journal of the American Planning Association; Vol. 35 No. 4 (July 1969)

E-GOVERNANCE AND BUILDING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES – 3

Techniques for online interaction

There are many means of interacting with an online audience and the web provides an ideal medium; there are considerable merits to knowing something about the community members – their age, gender, ethnicity, interests and so on.
Then the type of interaction needs to be decided - is it:

- One to one communication?
- One to many?
- Many to many?
- Is the goal to build social bonds?
- Share ideas and critique?
- Persuade?
- Build an audience or community?

The advantage in on-line interaction is that it can be quick; enable groups to gather 'instant' feedback and is relatively cheap.
Techniques include:

- **Email**

- **Email Newsletters**

- **Mailing Lists (or Listservs** which send e-mails to registered users)

- **Online Conferencing and Bulletin Boards:** The next step from mailing lists is web based conversation spaces known as bulletin boards, online forums or conferences. These have gained in popularity and form the most visible nucleus for online communities.

- **Chat:** Often dismissed as a trivial interaction designed for young people, chat can be a useful teaching tool and has been show effective for small group meeting where decisions can be made and details arranged.

- **Instant Messaging such as MSN messenger:** a useful tool for one-one or one to small group instant communication

- **Text messaging:** A method of consultation/ voting already well developed in other media – in particular radio – where listeners are asked to take part in competitions, express their views etc by texting in messages to a pre-designated text address.

- **Internet Broadcasts:** moves on from text based interaction to allow video streaming or podcasting (short visual/ audio files)

- **Online polling:** A straightforward 'vote' on a particular issue or area of interest.

- **Online forums/ consultation:** A mirror image of 'real' forms/ questionnaires, with people being asked to respond either to a questionnaire which is an email attachment or to access a particular

section of a website and return their responses 'on-line'.

- **Wiki:** an online space where users can add, edit, amend and delete content shared with a group of other people – most obviously seen in Wikipedia.

- **Blogs**: A web log or blog is a website where entries are written in date order with the most recent entry at the top. People who write for such systems are commonly referred to as bloggers.

Increasingly organisations are posting materials, using Web 2.0 technologies, which enable people to access information or discussion rooms using their I-pod or mobile phone.

It is important to note that online communication can be considered as part of the fuller range of tools, including traditional methods such as telephone conferencing, video conferencing, direct mail and other media. By combining the interactive tools available online with some of the targeted 'offline' information delivery methods, you can extend networks as well as identify, and meet, target communities' needs in new ways.

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E-GOVERNANCE AND BUILDING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES – 4

Community engagement; 'real time' and 'virtual' approaches

Method; 'Real Time'	Method; 'Virtual'	How It Works
Questionnaires – postal/ administered	e-Questionnaires	Questionnaire sent as: • Part of an email message • Attachment to an email • Signposted to a web-based questionnaire
Individual Interview	Individual e-discussion / interview	e-mail correspondence real time (eg MSN messaging)
Focus Groups	Real Time Discussion Group Time Limited Discussion Group	Discussions take place using a chat / discussion room over a designated / time limited period. These can be entirely web-based (eg. similar to virtual conferences) or use email based approaches
Citizen Juries	e-Juries	A 'closed' discussion area only open to members of the 'e-jury'. There are different approaches – where members only respond to pre-set questions / moderated answers or a more open approach where members can talk with each other
Expert Panels	e-Panels	Usually smaller than citizen / e-juries and draw on a particular set of (technical) expertise, rather than seeking wider 'representative' / public views
Community Conferences/ Community Visioning Events	e-Conferencing	Running a 'real time' conference / visioning event using the internet. Participants can respond to pre-set papers / policy documents
Voting/ Polling	e-Voting/Polling	Voting using text, MSN and other electronic media (eg digital TV)

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E-GOVERNANCE AND BUILDING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES – 5

The advantages and disadvantages of e-participation methods

There are a number of advantages to using web technologies in consultation exercises and to build participation. These are summarised below:

Method;	Advantages	Issues
e-Questionnaires	Speed of response Reaching 'new' groups Potential ease of analysis (depending on software systems used) Potentially cheaper than free-post responses on paper questionnaires	Controlling for sample/ representativeness Assumption of 'familiarity with / access to' the appropriate technology
Individual On-line Interview	Anonymous – may aid gathering information on 'sensitive' topics Reaching groups / individuals who might not otherwise participate in 'real time' interviews Participants may say things they would not say in a face to face interview	The issue of sampling Does not allow for an 'analysis' of non verbal communication Participants may say things they would not say in a face to face interview Assumption of 'familiarity with/ access to' the appropriate technology
Virtual Focus Groups	May engage groups / individuals who would not otherwise be able to participate (eg disabled people) Degree of anonymity	Controlling for sample/ representativeness Assumption of 'familiarity with/ access to' the appropriate technology
e - Citizen Juries	Larger number of people involved (potentially) Wider range of views gathered Speed of response Low environmental impact	As above Time taken for analysis / balancing view gathered with other consultation methods
e - Expert Panels	Access to technical experts who might not otherwise participate in 'real' events	Issues of validity of 'expert status' - potentially
e - Community Conferences/ Community Visioning Events	Low environmental impact 'Cheaper' than real time/ place events (potentially) Broader participation – eg 1,500 delegates rather than 300 (eg National Evaluation of the Children's Fund 'virtual conference')	Cost of marketing/building interest in event Controlling for sample / representative ness Assumption of 'familiarity with / access to' the appropriate technology
Voting / Polling	Quick/ cheap/ easy – likely to increase 'voter' turn out	Issues of security

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E-GOVERNANCE AND BUILDING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES – 6

Building Virtual Communities; Some Legal and Access Issues

The web can be a useful tool for building virtual networks. However, the very open nature of the internet means that any site can be open to abuse – particularly when sites offer chat and discussion services. In developing a website consideration needs to be given to:

1. Interaction on the internet is governed by 'real world' legislation – eg libel laws, Race Relations and Sex Discrimination Acts etc.

2. Ensuring the site is compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act and fully accessible to people with a range of visual or hearing impairments. Software is available that enables people to check compliance. For further information see: Bobby – www.webxact.watchfire.com or A-Prompt – www.aprompt.snow.utoronto.ca/

3. Advice is also available through, for example, the Employers Forum on Disability and the RNIB

4. Child protection guidance is available to help ensure that children are not open to abuse – or have access to unsuitable sites – from Internet Crime Forum (Home Office: March 2001), the Home Office Task Force on Child Protection on the Internet - Home Office (J July 2001) or via the www.thinkuknow.co.uk website

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E-GOVERNANCE AND BUILDING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES – 7

Building a Virtual Community; Some Ideas

It is interesting that the private sector has been quicker in exploiting new internet opportunities than community development work – particularly in terms of building their 'communities' or customer base. E-Bay, to take but one example, posts its values statement on its home page and invites people to join discussion and other groups "in the E-Bay community."

There is a clear pathway to creating a successful online community:

Content: technology is nothing without content, get the content right and the community will come. Content is (and always was) King. When you have content you will start to grow community. Your content needs to work well with search engines of course - but this is simpler than it sounds - write good copy, make sure that the subject matter is accurately and consistently described and search engines will find you. Growing a virtual community initially is literally all about numbers. A user accessing your resource has an IP Number (a code that is allocated to their user session) and all you will see in any statistics is a pathway taken by that number through your resource. The next trick is to turn that number into a name.

Provide a service: This is simply giving users a way by which they can register and reveal who they are - and you achieve this by offering a service of some sort - this might be a newsletter, a bulletin board, a wiki, subscription to a blog or some other offer that is useful enough for the anonymous 'community number' to want to become a community name.

Build the community up: once you start to see numbers growing - hold your nerve. Don't be tempted to run an online event or poll if your numbers are low. Wait until you have established a community that is large (this is sector dependant of course - i.e. a community built around, say, a rare genetic disorder is likely to interact with lower numbers of community members than say a large community interested in cricket). Keep an eye on those all-important statistics - see that community members are returning and staying in your resource.

Then work around events: when the community is large - call them back - offer extra services - experts online to answer questions - a video broadcast from someone eminent in your field. This way, community members will return and tell others and community grows.

Community to community: for the brave the final destination is to allow community to engage with community - using the lightest hand of control. This we now see commonly with MySpace and FaceBook but beware the urge to leave content to users. It is not common in any society that debate and discussion is left without any form of moderation – the chair at a meeting, the speaker in the House of Commons – these are all moderators or a kind.

Real or virtual communities?

The buzz word on the web is all about community. But is this not a manifestation of what real world communities have always been? People talking to people, sharing ideas and discussing issues in an environment they feel comfortable in? In many ways the web is nothing new at all, it is just a technology that makes the world a little bit smaller.

The main issue in developing a virtual community (and one which Community Development Workers are familiar with) is, do enough people have enough in common to want to participate?

Web discussion / communities are very effective where vulnerable individuals / groups want to discuss concerns but retain a degree of anonymity. Whereas some see the web as part of the breakdown of community and contributing to social isolation, it is interesting that it is disabled people's groups that have most effectively used new technologies to build national international networks and movements There are many examples of this:

In bereavement – www.winstonswish.org.uk
Domestic violence - www.womensaid.org.uk and www.thehideout.org.uk
Autism - www.awares.org and www.autismconnect.org
Mental health - www.mentalhealth.org.uk
Learning difficulties - www.fpld.org.uk
Physical disability - www.handyworld-si.com

Using the web is not an alternative to community development 'on the ground'. But it can be a powerful tool for building broader alliances between marginalised groups. It is a tool which community development needs, if not to embrace, then to use creatively to achieve its goals.

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