

ESRC

ESRC Seminar Series

Mapping the public policy landscape

ICT, social capital and voluntary action





Foreword

Information and communications technology (ICT) is changing how individuals interact with each other, with organisations and with Government. But how it impacts on social capital – that reserve of goodwill generated by people's social interactions – remains to a large extent unclear, and is still very much debated.

This booklet sets out to make a useful contribution to the debate.

It is based largely on presentations by Jayne Cravens, of Coyote Communications, and Ben Anderson, of the University of Essex, for the second in a series of seminars entitled 'Engaging Citizens', organised by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in collaboration with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO).

The series provides an opportunity for practitioners, academics and policymakers to shed new light on how people are helping build a society that is both inclusive and cohesive, and identify ways in which they are making positive differences in their communities.

Individual seminars will explore different aspects of participation, and look at the impact of institutional and technological change, as well as other factors which lie behind individual choices, behaviour and attitudes. And they will review what the implications might be for Government and the voluntary and community sector when developing and encouraging this engagement.

An earlier seminar examined faith-based voluntary action, whilst others in the series will focus on how and why individuals get involved over time, whether existing community participation in local governance has improved public services, and the impacts of globalisation and the Human Rights Act on all this.

ICT, social capital and voluntary action is just the latest topic to be looked at in the ESRC's Public Policy Seminar Series, in which we present independent research in key policy areas to potential users in Government, politics, the media, and the private and voluntary sectors. We see such events as an opportunity to establish further dialogue with the users of our research, and we welcome any subsequent contact.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Ian Diamond'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized 'D'.

Professor Ian Diamond
Chief Executive
Economic and Social Research Council

ICT, social capital and voluntary action

The researchers

JAYNE CRAVENS MSc BA is an internationally-recognised professional in public and press relations, marketing (from grass roots to international efforts), volunteer management, corporate community relations and online communications for mission-based, not-for-profit and non-governmental organisations, as well as for Government Departments, schools and related initiatives. She has supported numerous organisations as an independent consultant on outreach, community-building and organising, issue-based advocacy, volunteer management, capacity-building, organisational management, and fund-raising. She is former director of the UN's Online Volunteering service, www.onlinevolunteering.org, and the Virtual Volunteering Project, based at the University of Texas – Austin. A US citizen, she lives in Germany.

DR BEN ANDERSON BSc PhD is a deputy director of the Chimera research institute, and visiting researcher at the Institute for Social and Economic Research, both at the University of Essex. His general research interests include longitudinal time-use data analysis; spatial microsimulation, and ICT usage behaviour. He has used techniques from cognitive psychology, anthropology, sociology and ethnography during his time as an academic and commercial research scientist engaged in user studies, human computer interaction and applied social research.



Executive Summary

Introduction

Research and consultations have shown consistently that a broader agenda for civil renewal is needed which recognises the value of civil participation in its own right, and highlights the importance of building connections within and between communities as well as with Government.

An important factor in the equation is the impact of information and communications technology (ICT).

Some commentators believe that ICT diminishes social capital, and fails to build strong ties between people. Others, meanwhile, have highlighted how, on the contrary, ICT is offering additional means of communication which are strengthening existing social networks and providing a series of opportunities for new connections to be made.

So what do we really mean by online communities? What sort of people get involved in them and why? Are online and traditional face-to-face activities mutually exclusive forms of contact, or does one actually complement or even feed the other?

Are some ICT initiatives more likely to succeed than others; are they best managed centrally or at grassroots level; and what kind of support do they need?

On the following pages, we take a close look at 'virtual' voluntary action, examining the evidence for both short and long term effects of community networks on social capital and quality of life.

We discuss the sort of things online volunteers do, and the potential benefits to those organisations which involve them, along with considering the debate around whether ICT initiatives can contribute to the 'bonding' form of social capital as well as to the 'bridging' kind.

Lastly, along with giving examples of community ICT initiatives and related research projects, we offer recommendations both for voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) and policymakers on how to encourage, sustain, and get the maximum benefit from online communities.





Key insights and implications

- Jayne Cravens explains that Cyberspace is made up of a diverse group of people, representing a range of ages, geographies and experiences.
- She points out that, contrary to what we might believe, there is nothing new about online communities, nor online volunteering. These practices have been around for many years, even decades, by some accounts, and continue to grow in popularity.
- It has become the norm for voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) to engage in online activities, rather than the exception. Online communities and online volunteering provide excellent avenues for them to connect with current and potential donors, volunteers, clients and the general public. In fact, a VCO ignores the Internet at risk of having its work overshadowed by those who *do* make the commitment to involve people online and subsequently benefit from this new source of social capital.
- People do not substitute online volunteering nor online communities for onsite, traditional volunteering and community; rather, Internet-based forms of service and sharing are usually extensions of off-line activities and groups.
- Most online volunteers are not geographically-remote from the organisations they support; they are around the corner rather than around the world.
- Ben Anderson reports that whilst local ICT initiatives support the development of social capital in communities, some researchers still question whether social capital needs to be in place already for it to grow.
- There is concern that ICT initiatives may lead to those communities already rich in social capital benefiting most. It is still an open question as to how to benefit less well connected communities. More experimentation and action research is needed.
- Grassroots initiatives may be more sustainable not least because they draw heavily on local social capital, but more crucially because they tend to be much more attuned to what the local people need and want from the service(s). Whilst generally highly motivated, their core support structure is prone to burn out and needs ongoing support through committed long term (five-10 years) low-level funding.
- Smaller communities will not have the technical expertise, nor the funds, to support community networks. Low bridging capital is a problem, and there is a need to help develop links between individuals and communities to resolve ICT problems when resources are stretched.

Online communities: mobilisers of philanthropy and volunteerism, and cultivators of social capital

Jayne Cravens on why voluntary and community organisations simply cannot ignore the Internet

The concept of social capital is at the heart of the articles here, assessing the impact of ICTs. Like most terms, 'social capital' is contested. The definition adhered to in this article is that of Francis Fukuyama, who described it as the existence of a certain (ie specific) set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permit co-operation among them. That established, the Internet has resulted in the formation of numerous online communities that bring together people in support of various causes and VCOs (civil society, non-profit and non-governmental organisations, etc.) And these online participants feel every bit as passionate and committed as those engaged in face-to-face activities. In fact, the participants in both avenues of social capital generation are often the same.

The media may portray the Internet as the domain of teenagers, but the reality is that cyberspace is populated by a huge diversity of people:

- Professionals – lawyers, doctors, accountants, teachers, web designers, nurses, HR managers...
- Students
- Stay-at-home parents
- People with disabilities
- Vivacious people
- Shy people
- Women
- Men
- Teenagers
- Seniors/Elders
- Techies
- Non-Techies
- People in developed countries
- People in developing countries
- People in big cities
- People in rural areas
- People across the street
- People across the world

A whole variety of people are coming together online to support organisations and causes in which they believe – and they have been doing so for many years.

VCOs are connecting with current and potential donors, volunteers, clients and the general public through cyberspace – primarily via two avenues: online communities and online volunteering.

Online communities

Online *communities* are online *discussions*. They are all about *people* – not *technology*.

Online communities:

- are e-mail based, web-based, or have their own special platform;
- have a primary purpose or theme, serious or not;
- have members, some of whom post thoughts and comments (talk), and some who just lurk (read but do not post);

- are sometimes busy, and sometimes quiet;
- can be private, exclusive, moderated, facilitated, completely public, formal, informal...;
- can be friendly, scary, fun, serious, welcoming, hostile...;
- can fail from lack-of-participation, absence of a sense of belonging by or value for members, loss of people's common threads, and through losing key members.

In short, online communities are a lot like traditional onsite communities. The fact is, successful participation in online communities, or hosting of them, has nothing to do with one's technical skills, and everything to do with one's people skills.

But why is it that some people like – even love – these online communities?

Some key reasons are:

- they can participate whenever they want to make the time to do so (maybe the middle of the day, or three o'clock in the morning);
- they don't have to drive anywhere, look for a place to park, or dress a certain way;
- some people feel more comfortable sharing from a computer than in a face-to-face setting;
- great ideas and important feedback don't always come during onsite meetings.

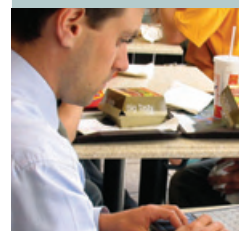
Research* has shown that very few people substitute online communities for onsite, face-to-face ones. Often, one is an extension of the other; or an online community is an extension of an offline activity.

Online communities affiliated formally or informally with VCOs can be divided into two categories:

- (1) those hosted (controlled) by a VCO, and
- (2) those hosted by another group or individual who may or may not be associated in some way with a particular VCO, but are focused on specific issues central to it.

The members of such online communities can include current, potential and previous volunteers, donors, staff, clients, and advocates (people willing to state publicly their support for a cause, to write to Government, corporate and other offices regarding this support, etc):

The makeup of an organisation's online community/ies will reflect that of its volunteers, donors, staff, clients, advocates, and so on. So, if a group appeals primarily to older people, probably most of its online participants will be senior citizens.



*Cravens, J. (2000). Agency surveys 1997-2000 in "Virtual Volunteering Project: Message and Survey Archive", www.serviceleader.org/old/vv/admin/, The Virtual Volunteering Project, University of Texas at Austin.

Cravens, J. (2006), "Involving International Online Volunteers: Factors for Success, Organizational Benefits, and New Views of Community," The International Journal of Volunteer Administration, North Carolina State University.

Why host online communities?

There are a number of reasons for a VCO to consider hosting its own online community/ies, and participating in those hosted by others.

- Participation can be used to reinforce an organisation's messages.
- For people who are hungry to connect to others and to causes in which they believe, this allows them yet another way to do so.
- Taking part in this way creates a sense of openness and transparency about an organisation, which is crucial in this day and age of increased scrutiny of the third sector:
- People get a sense of voice – of being heard.
- The online community creates even stronger ties to an organisation for its supporters, those it serves, and the general public.
- And it can – and most probably will – lead to an increase in offline, face-to-face participation of volunteers, members, clients, etc, in the organisation's traditional, non-Internet-related activities.

The focus of a VCO's 'official' online community/ies can be any number of things, including:

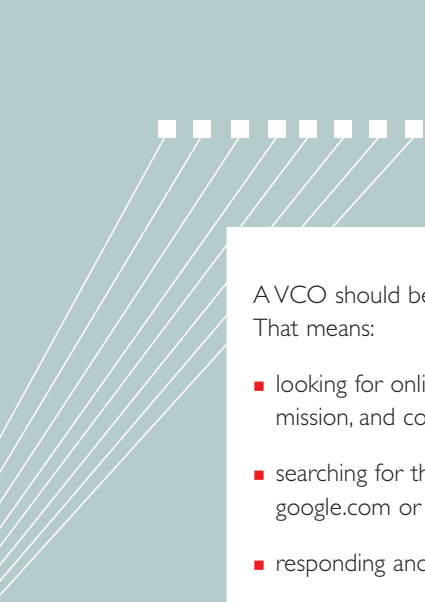
- current volunteers: what they are doing, help they might need, and sharing experiences, etc.
- clients: sharing their experiences, hopes, fears, etc.
- advocates: updates and discussion regarding legislation, corporate policies, media accounts, etc, along with suggestions for action, and sharing experiences.
- remote staff: updates and discussion about current activities, new organisational policies, help they might need, and sharing experiences, etc.

If an organisation does not host its own online community, for whatever participants, it can expect its volunteers, clients and advocates – and sometimes, even its staff – to create their own or to participate in those hosted by others.

And even if it does create such a community, staff need to be prepared for those it serves to be tempted to create their own groups anyway, if they feel that the 'official' online forum is not open and transparent enough, is not as much 'fun', or does not meet their needs.

In terms of social capital, a VCO ignores the Internet – and, therefore, the general public – at its own risk. Many people now look at a VCO that does not offer volunteers and other supporters significant ways to connect with it online, that does not participate in online communities, and is unaware of what is being said about it online, as an insular organisation lacking transparency and not valuing grassroots input.

It has become the norm for VCOs to engage in online activities, rather than the exception, and a VCO ignoring online communities and participants risks having its work overshadowed by those VCOs that *do* make the commitment to involve people online.



A VCO should be aware of, but not *beware*, what is being said about its work and its staff online. That means:

- looking for online communities hosted by others that are focused on issues similar to the organisation's mission, and consider having staff and even volunteers to participate in them (and not just 'lurk');
- searching for the organisation's name, and those of its key staff and volunteers on, for instance, google.com or myspace.com.
- responding and countering negative online buzz – but *not* trying to suppress criticism.

Online Volunteers

Anyone who contributes to a VCO's online communities becomes an online volunteer. In fact, some contributors will already be traditional, onsite volunteers at the VCO.

Online volunteers are also anyone who completes assigned tasks, in whole or in part, from a home, work, university, cyber cafe or telecentre/community centre computer.

Other names for online volunteering include virtual volunteering, cyber service and telementoring. It is the same as telecommuting, but instead of employees, it involves volunteers (unpaid staff).

Just as research has shown that very few people substitute online communities for onsite ones, it reveals that most online volunteers are *also* onsite volunteers. Very few choose to volunteer only online.

It is worth noting, too, that most online volunteers are around the corner rather than around the world from the organisations they support.

This is nothing new

The impression may be that online volunteering is a very new practice; in fact, it has been happening for more than 30 years. Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org) is probably the oldest example. This non-profit endeavour was established in 1971, decades before public access to the digital highway became the norm. Through the contributions of online volunteers, it provides electronic versions of many classic works, such as *Les Misérables*, *Dracula*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, as well as various academic and technical manuals no longer in print.

Online volunteering began to become more widespread among VCOs in the mid-1990s, with greater use of the Internet. CompassPoint Non-profit Services in San Francisco hosted one of the first presentations about online volunteering, in 1995. The early efforts of organisations as regards online volunteering were chronicled at the Virtual Volunteering Project (www.serviceleader.org/old/vv).

Things online volunteers do – and why

Online volunteers undertake a variety of tasks in support of civil society, and many of the tasks are not related to computer or Internet technologies. These volunteers:

- translate documents
- research topics
- create web pages
- edit and prepare proposals and press releases
- contribute to curricula
- develop databases
- design graphics
- offer legal or business expertise
- tutor students
- mentor young people
- moderate online discussion groups
- manage other online volunteers
- and more...


As noted earlier, online volunteers represent a huge range of people, from teenagers to senior citizens, from students to professionals to retirees, and are to be found in both developed and developing countries. Motivations for volunteering via cyberspace vary; such volunteers may:

- want to learn about organisations, jobs, cities, communities, countries and cultures, and about issues faced by VCOs).
- want to feel like they are having a positive impact on the world.
- want to exercise skills they are learning, or have learnt.
- want to take on roles and responsibilities which their professional work may not provide.
- want to reconnect with and provide help to his or her home city, state or country.
- want to provide service at whatever time of day is convenient, without having to change clothes, drive a car or ride a bus somewhere, look for a parking place or find a place to stay for the evening.
- have no other way to volunteer; due perhaps to home obligation, disability, or lack of transport.

And why organisations involve them

There are a number of reasons why organisations involve online volunteers:

- They have skills and expertise which VCOs may not, but are needed.
- They may have sophisticated hardware or software that VCOs lack.
- They help stretch onsite resources even further; often allowing VCOs and onsite volunteers to serve more people and do more activities.
- Online volunteering enables participation by people who find onsite volunteering difficult or impossible because of a disability, home obligation, transportation difficulties or work schedule. This in turn allows organisations to benefit from the additional talent and resources of more, and a greater diversity of, volunteers.
- These volunteers do not require physical accommodations (no desk, no chair, no parking place).



Success in involving online volunteers and in maintaining online communities is bound in the same fundamentals as involving onsite, face-to-face volunteers. For instance, online volunteers will keep supporting an organisation, and online community members will keep contributing to online forums, if...

- they understand and feel a part of its mission
- they understand how their contributions help
- they feel as recognised as onsite, face-to-face volunteers and other participants.

But how safe is the Internet?

A concern almost always voiced at discussions of online volunteering is safety. There is a perception that involving people via the Internet is somehow inherently unsafe. The reality is that the Internet is no more safe, nor less safe, than face-to-face interactions, and that volunteers, whether online or face-to-face, are as 'safe' or potentially harmful as paid staff.

Online risks should be addressed in the same way as onsite risks: through training, the setting and adherence to policy and procedures, constant sharing of information, supervision, software (anti-virus, anti-spyware, firewalls) and so on. Just as the screening procedures for different onsite volunteers will vary, depending on their responsibilities and contact with others, so too will such for online volunteers. In addressing online risks, an organisation should consider how it ensures confidentiality and safety in onsite settings, and apply those same standards online (for example, criminal background checks, constant supervision, full disclosure of identities, and full moderation of communities).



Want to know more?

The author has created a Web page specifically for readers of this publication and those attending the October 2006 'ICT, social capital and voluntary action' seminar in London. It offers further resources regarding:

- Best practices for online communities and online volunteering
- Recruitment tips for membership in online communities or for online volunteers
- A review of new jargon/tools, like Online Social Networking (OSN), 'blogging', podcasts, etc.
- Research



**Jayne Cravens &
www.coyotecomunications.com**

www.coyotecomunications.com/ESRC

ICT in local action – a force for good?

Ben Anderson on his recent investigation with Mark Gaved of the Knowledge Media Institute, Open University, into whether ICT-based community initiatives can increase social capital and improve people's quality of life.

There is wide support for the idea that attempts to increase uptake and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) can foster local community ties through education, job opportunities, encouraging community activities and increasing general sociability. Externally initiated and funded 'community networks' form a key element of Government proposals to overcome the 'digital divide'. Extending the pilot UK Online Centres, and the Wired Up Communities projects have, for instance, provided a range of local resources such as public Internet and computing access/usage locations as well as subsidised equipment for the home. Other projects have included investment in local infrastructure such as broadband fixed and wireless (WiFi) connectivity within the locality and to the Internet at large when national providers refused to offer service. However not all initiatives are Internet and computer focused. A few recent initiatives have made use of mobile telephones as a cheaper and simpler mechanism to provide access to information and services, not to mention social relationships.

At the European level, a Commission working paper last year reiterating the importance of local implementation of employment strategies, pointed out that ICT-based initiatives should be no different.

"European or national inclusion policies certainly have a key role, but without complementary strong local initiatives these are doomed to fail.... Community networking projects – such as Local Nets – bring new opportunities for both digital and social inclusion – as well as for social capital building. They represent a model for designing policy interventions aimed at fostering 'participation of all'.... Good practices and case studies provide the empirical evidence for the social impact of Local Nets...eInclusion measures should build upon this trend and target local and community-based development with an holistic approach". (Commission of the European Communities 2005)

However, researchers increasingly question the types of opportunity that such community networks offer, and the forms of social change they can facilitate.

Our study examined the evidence for both short and long term effects of community networks on social capital and quality of life, to help guide policy recommendations for future developments and their maintenance.

In a search for evidence, our study examined material from a wide range of countries both inside and outside the EU.

Shorter term effects

Initial results of engaging a community with a local ICT initiative are often encouraging. External funding to alleviate real or perceived deprivation is likely to be well received, and help at least part of the community. Even people who do not benefit directly are likely to approve of such positive developments, and they will most probably lead to a feeling of increased social capital and quality of life.

Activity in the community itself implies generation of social capital. It is likely to boost interpersonal relationships and encourage a sense of contributing to the community and involvement in local issues.

When it comes to civic participation, those who adopt ICT early on seem more inclined to use the Internet to increase their community involvement, political participation and connectivity with like-minded people. These people are also more likely to engage in civic activities generally, and reflect a particular demographic group within their communities, having higher than average income and education level.

As 'later developers' come on board, their interest in the ICT tools focuses more on online shopping and commercial services, resulting in only modest effects so far as community involvement is concerned.

The two forms of social capital

There are two kinds of social capital.

The first – bonding social capital – comes through membership of groups whose members are similar to yourself, and formed from strong ties. They can be described as homogenous. Examples include networks of close friends, family and associates, and they are often a key source of social support in times of need.

The other sort is bridging social capital, which is available through membership of groups that are heterogeneous, and generally formed from weak or transient ties, often between homogenous groups. Examples include interest-groups, such as the infamous bowling clubs, and social and leisure acquaintances. These are often a key source of new information, precisely because the ties are between dissimilar people.

Bonding capital

There is a fierce debate about whether or not ICT initiatives can develop bonding capital significantly.

Some researchers theorise that strong social capital is required to develop a successful ICT initiative, and a number have noted that it is groups with more bonding capital that make greater use of the technology, supporting their own existing activities and needs.

Indeed, grassroots initiatives are often found in 'elective' communities where there has been a history of community co-operation and strong local social ties.

On the other hand, other studies have shown that the number of social contacts supported by wired neighbours far outweighed the connections maintained by their unwired ones. Wired residents also used the telephone more, making four times as many calls, and demonstrating that access to a network may increase other communications. So rather than a displacement communication device, ICT is complementary, becoming part of a broader 'media ecology' used to maintain social contacts.



Bridging capital

Because they are physically situated in the neighbourhood, local ICT initiatives can help develop bridging ties, and may lead to the growth of social networks purely by chance. For instance, a Swedish study found that a community Internet café strengthened what had been weak ties between different groups within a multi-ethnic and deprived neighbourhood, through its role as a meeting place for various people interested in the Internet and using the physical space itself. Research in the UK found that participating residents who received training, Internet access and computers, had reinforced their social networks and developed new ties, as well as becoming better informed about resources such as community projects and local council facilities. So community ICT initiatives can be seen to help strengthen, or possibly even initiate, weak ties, developing bridging social capital within a community.

However, removing a community network may degrade social capital. Without the medium, the opportunity to maintain the ties may drop away. It is important that community ICT initiatives consider issues of sustainability if they wish to have a lasting and positive effect on community social capital.

Longer term effects

Longer term effects are, as we have said, difficult to assess, though a small number of projects have collected data over a longer period. These suggest that, early on, they offered novel experiences and were utilised by 'early adaptors' whereas, later, a broader range of users and uses emerged.

Andrea Kavanaugh, of Virginia Polytechnic, suggested in 2001 that, in the long term, 'Internet access will have only a modest effect on community involvement and civic engagement in geographic communities, and will be limited to those individuals (early adopters) with higher levels of education and social status, who have traditionally been more actively involved in their local communities'. Later adaptors may use ICTs in very different ways, and as people have longer term access, their usage may evolve.

Despite Kavanaugh's pessimistic predictions, in the former Wired up Community of Alston Moor (UK), residents are showing a depth of Internet use beyond shopping and commercial services. The 'early adopters' were responsible for setting up a lift-sharing scheme accessible online, a local skills directory and a discussion board for matters concerning the community, amongst other services.

Early adopters in Alston appeared to be those already involved in community activities and motivated to improve life for local people. Two years after implementation, concerted efforts were made to encourage other sections of the community to go online, including older residents and the unemployed – that is, the so-called 'late adopters'.

Partly as a result, the older population in Alston has a range of Internet use way above the national average, and are accessing a broad range of services, particularly those to do with education and the local community. Online lifelong learning services are proving extremely popular here, as well as online medical information and access to local information.

<http://www.cybermoor.org/communicate/>

In summary

Capital in/Capital out?

While social capital can result from ICT initiatives, it is also needed to make them happen in the first place. We found that though most ICT initiatives support the development of social capital in the community, those already rich in it benefit most.

It is still an open question as to how to benefit less well connected communities.

Initiatives can also contribute to a broad range of improvements to quality of life, but it appears that the effects are often short term.

There is evidence, too, that the communication tools provided by community networks can help groups organise themselves to achieve local action over environmental or service issues, or even the ICT infrastructure itself. For example, when faced with the potential closure of their local high-speed broadband network (and so their connection to the Internet) the householders of one wired neighbourhood in Toronto used the very communication resources it provided (mailing lists and bulletin boards) to try to build pressure to reverse the decision. However, this may again be a case of those most socially-minded taking advantage of a tool with which they were already familiar.

Some older people, with more free time but more acutely aware of issues of mobility, use local ICT initiatives to enhance their social and leisure activities, with potential benefits for their sense of health and well-being.

Top-down versus grassroots

Our research suggests that top-down, centrally managed projects are prone to a range of problems that make their long-term sustainability doubtful in contrast to grassroots initiatives owned and managed by the communities themselves.

In other words, grassroots ICT initiatives may be more sustainable than those driven by outside policy interventions.

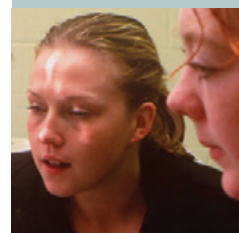
As William Davies remarks in a 2004 study for The Work Foundation: 'The very fact that the project is not dependent on external money means that there is nothing to run out of.'

Grassroots initiatives are supported from within the community, usually on a financially self-sustaining basis. But they often draw heavily on the community's social capital, which can be spent, as well as accrued, in keeping the initiative up and running. Constantly relying on the goodwill of others to provide services is problematic in the long run if there is an imbalance in the flow of social capital – such as when one or a few (unpaid) individuals feel that the majority are benefiting from their actions with little returned. At this point, some low level of funding is required to ensure continuity.

As a result, help is necessary in developing links between individuals and communities to resolve ICT problems when the resources of the community are stretched.

Smaller communities often do not have the technical expertise nor the funds to support community networks. So co-operative collaborations, such as the Community Broadband Network, which acts as an umbrella organisation for the myriad of community-owned broadband access projects, need support.

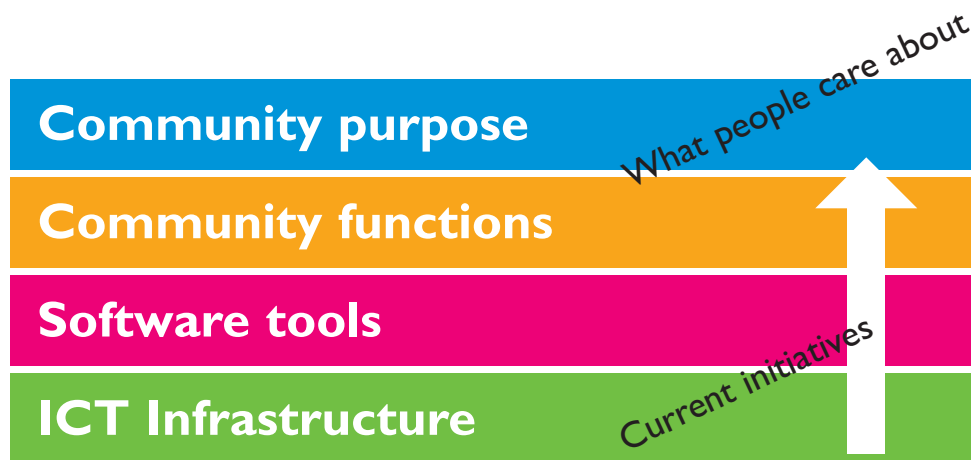
See <http://www.broadband-uk.coop/>



Recommendations for policymakers

- Policy initiatives should be oriented towards grassroots actions and to provision via social enterprises. Sustainability should be encouraged through committed long term (five-10 years) low-level funding.
- Collaborations between grassroots initiatives should be encouraged and actions (such as financial support) should be taken to help exchange of knowledge and experience through the setting up and support of associations.
- There should be an explicit strategy to transfer from Government/VCO 'provision' to community self-provision and ownership during the lifetime of any given initiative.
- Funding agencies should consider providing support for the development of social capital that links separate groups, as this appears to create the most resiliency within communities.
- Development of local ICT initiatives should consider first developing or assuring the presence of social capital within communities before the introduction of technology.
- Home access is preferred over local (eg telecentre) access. Telecentres provide a 'third place', and are valuable in encouraging support, training, and cohesion across different groups within communities, but use of public access facilities is limited by social and cultural factors.
- 'Technological capital' is required. Technological skills allow individuals to produce their own cultural products as well as being consumers, leading to increased social capital. Initiatives should consider very carefully how they can provide this through easy access to free training and experimentation.
- Initiatives need to go up the citizens' value chain – technological aids will not be used if they do not address community purposes.
- Tools and frameworks should be created which enable individuals and communities to build the content and services they want, not the ones 'we' think they should have. (See the item on the CASweb project, in London, immediately after this section).
- There should be a systematic programme of research into recent initiatives, so as to understand their long-term social impact and costs/benefits. All new Government- funded initiatives should insist on longer-term (> four-five years) studies of their social impact as a condition of funding.
- Often, involvement by policymakers and academics in grassroots initiatives is seen as getting in the way of the real work – an amusing distraction at best, frequently viewed with caution and scepticism. Policymakers need to support grassroots activists to enable them to engage in reflective thinking beyond their day-to-day concerns (setting up and running their networks) and to carry out their own research, or participate as equal partners in externally-backed studies.

Figure I: The citizen's value chain and the role of local ICT initiatives



The above is drawn from 'The impact of local ICT initiatives on social capital and quality of life, Chimera Working Paper 2006-6, Colchester, University of Essex' by Mark Gaved and Ben Anderson, and a subsequent article by the authors for e-govmonitor (www.egovmonitor.com).

For an online version of the working paper, and others in the series, go to:

www.essex.ac.uk/chimera/publications.html

This research was supported by the EU FP6 IST Programme Special Support Action 'SOCQUIT' (FP6-507753, www.socquit.net)

Chimera, or the Institute for Socio-Technical Innovation and Research, at the University of Essex, combines the social and technological sciences to generate insights into the personal and social use of information and communication technologies. It aims to understand what people do, how they do it, how this changes over time and what difference it makes. This understanding is then applied to the design of new technologies, commercial strategies or public policy interventions.

www.essex.ac.uk/chimera



CASweb – gateway to community advice



Government funding has enabled the London Central Partnership to develop CASweb. It is a free, one-stop portal through which non-profit advice organisations and community groups based in, or working with residents in, the five London boroughs of Camden, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster and Corporation of London, can find and share guidance.

CASweb provides this voluntary sector with a new way to communicate, giving them the right tools to create a web presence. It makes interaction with local authorities, other advice organisations and users easy.

Groups can use it to announce news and activities; update and maintain information on services provided, including opening times and contact details; have discussion forums with users and/or members; conduct online surveys and polls which only their users and members can access; and publish documents such as leaflets, annual reports, press releases, forms and fact sheets.

Access is through any Internet-enabled computer at home, or in public places such as a library or Internet café. The project also offers access to refurbished computers at low prices through a partnership with a PC disposals company.

There are now more than 100 groups involved, and recently the organisers have been approached by school groups in Islington who would like to set up a site.

www.casweb.org/

Casweb – ‘a strategic response to the risk of digital exclusion in the provision of e-government services across central London’ – is taken as a case study in ‘Evaluative Design of e-Government Projects: a Community Development Perspective’ by Mike Grimsley, of Sheffield Hallam University, Anthony Meehan, of The Open University, and Anna Tan of ODPM.

<http://mcs.open.ac.uk/am4469/GrimsleyMeehanTan-EGovt-Preprint.pdf>



Doing one's duty: volunteering in a deprived community



In Government websites, policy statements, ministerial speeches and commission reports, volunteering is being re-branded in ways that link it with an ethic of work, through schemes such as New Deal, Sure Start and so on.

But is that how volunteers see things?

A recent ESRC-funded study led by Professor Irene Hardill, of Nottingham Trent University, with Dr Susan Baines, of the University of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, found that terms such as 'mutual aid' and 'philanthropy' resonated far more strongly with people involved in voluntary work.

In case studies of organisations using volunteers in one deprived community, which drew volunteers from further afield, the main reasons given for volunteering were:

- Mutual aid – people volunteered to help those within their own community. They wanted to put something back
- Philanthropy – people from outside the community volunteered out of a sense of altruism. They felt fortunate and wanted to make a difference
- 'Getting by' – people volunteered in reaction to a personal need or as a result of an individual life event like retirement or bereavement. This is volunteering as a form of self-help
- 'Getting on' – people who volunteer as a way of developing new skills and experiences that are valued in the labour market. This is volunteering to get a job or for career development.

Ethics of volunteering

Volunteers in the first two categories were more common (three-quarters of the study sample) and were mainly motivated by an ethic of care rather than by an anticipation of personal gain.

Researchers found only limited evidence of people volunteering to 'get on', for personal gain to improve their position in the labour market.

Doing one's duty: a case study of volunteering in a deprived community

Project website: www.gsr.ntu.ac.uk/esrcvolunteering.htm

ESRC Today website: www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

Other related research



What is e-society?

ESRC E-Society is the largest ever-academic research programme to investigate the impact on society of digital technologies, particularly the Internet. Original and insightful findings from the programme are already helping both policymakers and industry to respond better to the needs and demands of people in the new e-society.

Twenty-eight projects from across the social sciences are producing key findings in six related areas of research: Children and the e-society; Cities and neighbourhood change in an e-society; Health and health services in an e-society; Privacy, identity and trust in an e-society; Socio-political divisions and change in an e-society; and Work, consumption and business in an e-society.

Based at the Department of Sociology at the University of York, this £5million programme draws on the expertise of leading academics from across the UK. Launched in October 2003, it will run until the end of October 2007. Project coordinator is Professor Roger Burrows.

www.york.ac.uk/res/e-society/index.htm

Analysing Microsocial change

In an ESRC-funded project '*Using Time-Use Data to Analyse Macro and Microsocial Change in an e-Society – eSocTU*', researchers at Chimera, led by Dr Ben Anderson, are testing the thesis that the increasing pervasiveness of new media and specifically information and communication technologies (ICTs) is creating a significantly new society. The study focuses on possible changes in five sociological issues (social life, leisure, travel, shopping and media use) and three overarching issues (multitasking, sequences of activities, and where activities take place). The project started in February, 2005, and lasts for two years.

www.essex.ac.uk/chimera

PACCIT project

P@CCIT

Research is needed to develop a much greater understanding of the psychological, social and organisational characteristics of individuals and groups as they relate to, and interact with, information technologies, and to feed this knowledge back into evaluation and design of more effective IT systems and products.

People @ the Centre of Communication and Information Technologies (PACCIT) aims to achieve these goals by fostering strong academic and commercial research partnerships to tackle these important topics. PACCIT is funded by the ESRC, with further support from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, and the DTI. Thirty research projects across the UK have been funded. PACCIT is directed by Professor Anne Anderson, University of Glasgow.

www.paccit.gla.ac.uk



Democracy and Participation

This ESRC-funded programme encompassed 21 projects from a range of disciplines, including politics, sociology, social policy, geography and education, and looked at, among other things, the impact of the Internet. A key element was a Citizens' Audit – a large-scale survey into the state of citizen participation in Britain, building on the work of researchers in Sweden.

Key aspects from the programme are described in a book, *'Citizenship in Britain: Values, Participation and Democracy'* by Charles Pattie and Patrick Seyd, University of Sheffield, and Paul Whiteley, University of Essex (Cambridge University Press, 2004).





Further information

The full papers presented at the ICT, social capital and volunteering seminar held at the NCVO in London on October 5, 2006, including full details of academic references, are available on the ESRC Society Today website at:

www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

Online Communities: Mobilisers of Philanthropy and Volunteerism, and Cultivators of Social Capital

www.coyotecomunications.com

ICT in local action – a force for good?

benander@essex.ac.uk

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) is the umbrella body for the voluntary sector in England. It works to support the voluntary sector and to create an environment in which voluntary organisations can flourish. It represents the views of the voluntary sector to policymakers and Government and consults with the sector to inform policy positions on issues generic to the sector. It also carries out in-depth research to promote a better understanding of the sector and its activities. NCVO has a growing membership of over 4,500 voluntary organisations, ranging from large national charities to small local community groups.

NCVO

Regent's Wharf
8 All Saints Street
London N1 9RL
Telephone 020 7713 6161
Fax 020 7713 6300
Helpdesk 0800 2 798 798
E-mail: ncvo@ncvo-vol.org.uk



The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK's leading research and training agency addressing economic and social concerns. It aims to provide high-quality research on issues of importance to business, the public sector and Government. The issues considered include economic competitiveness, the effectiveness of public services and policy, and our quality of life.

The ESRC is an independent organisation, established by Royal Charter in 1965, and funded mainly by the Government.

Economic and Social Research Council
Polaris House
North Star Avenue
Swindon SN2 1UJ

Telephone: 01793 413000
Fax: 01793 413001
E-mail: comms@esrc.ac.uk
www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk