

## **People First: The role of Community Networks in putting the new Information and communications technologies into the hands of ordinary people**

A recent programme on British television featured computer shopping. We were introduced to a young professional family who now use the Internet to do their weekly shopping. "Its great!" the woman said: "Now I can order the shopping at a time convenient to me - even after midnight, and it gets delivered the next day. I save several hours each weekend which I can now spend with my children." Such stories have become commonplace in the media. A whole range of business and public organisations are now considering how they can use the Internet and related technologies to deliver their services more cheaply or effectively.

It is easy for professional people, who are used to using computers through their work, to move towards using these new computer based technologies. However it is going to be much more difficult for the great majority of our population who are unused to using computers to benefit from the new possibilities offered. If these new services can only be used by a minority of the population, it will not only limit the effectiveness of the services, it will also result in increasing social exclusion. Clearly there is an urgent need to build the computer skills of the population as a whole. I believe that providing online networking opportunities for local communities is the most effective way of tackling this fundamental issue.

## **What are Community Networks?**

"Community network" is a phrase that has come to us from the United States. It describes a range of services that are available to local people that are usually provided by one particular organisation - the local community network. In Europe things are developing rather differently and there may be a number of organisations providing different parts of the overall community network. I therefore prefer to talk about community networks not as an organisation but as an overall description of the ways that a local community can use the new information and communication technologies to network together. I find it helpful to think of there being four main characteristics:

1. Firstly, community networks provide public space in cyberspace. In the European Community Networking Conference in Milan last year, the example was given of the Dome Square, right in the heart of the city. In the evening it is full of groups of people walking up and down and chatting about anything they want to. They can make business deals, they can share their experiences and ideas, they can plan campaigns to make their city better. Conversations can be serious or light-hearted, profound or "superficial". No one is there to tell you what to do or to discuss. You go there when you want, you talk with whom you want and on what subject you want. There needs to be this public space in cyberspace so that people can use it for what they want. Whatever else community networks do, in terms of providing public service information, commercial services and so on, it is essential that they fulfil this role.

As public space it must be open to everyone, so community networks also have to tackle the issue of access. In the short term this means having a whole range of public access points which anyone can use and which must be free or at least affordable to all. However in the long term it must involve making sure that people can access cyberspace from their own home so that it becomes as much a part of everyone's life

as the telephone. It also means that community networks have to focus on training and support to ensure that everyone has the skills they need to utilise the technology for their benefit.

2. Secondly community networks recognise that communication is more important than information provision. Information is important, but people are even more interested in talking with each other. In fact one of the best ways to gain useful information is to meet up with and ask questions of an expert. It is interesting that in Blacksburg, "America's most wired town" with over 50% of the population having Internet connection, the average person spends only 2 hours a week on the world wide web but 5 hours a week emailing. This means that it is not enough just to set up a web site to provide a comprehensive local information resource. Community networks have to involve email, newsgroups and email discussion lists if they are really meet the needs of the public.
3. Community networks have to be locally focused. This is not to say that there is no value in using the new technologies to link together communities of interest. I myself participate in several national and international email discussion groups and find them of great benefit. However the value of locally focused community networks is that we ourselves are locally focused. Most of us live, shop, work and engage in leisure activities in a particular locality and it is very useful for a community network to reflect that. It also makes it much easier for electronic communications to support and enhance the other ways we communicate if they are locally focused. For instance in Blacksburg, many senior citizens only "met up" first through the local community network, but because they live close to each other, now take part in many social activities together. Of course once locally focused community networks are set up throughout the country, then community of interest networks can easily link in with these, to the benefit of both.
4. The final characteristic of community networks is that they work best when they are comprehensive, covering all aspects of life. A community network is not complete if it simply addresses the needs of the so called community sector. The communities in which we live contain public bodies, businesses, schools and educational establishments as well as voluntary and community groups. All of us have to communicate with and interact with all these different sections of our local community. A community network needs to reflect this. This means that a community network is best provided by all the sectors working together to ensure that all are represented fully. This may be by a formal partnership arrangement that runs the whole network. It may equally well be done by different services being provided by different organisations, but with clear agreements as to each others roles and with links maintained with each other's services.

In summary, community networks demystify the technology and give people immediate and obvious benefits from developing their IT skills. They provide a way for local people to use the Internet to do things that interest them and to make the use of IT as natural part of their everyday lives as is the telephone. By promoting local community networks we are ensuring an IT literate population that will be able to use the new technologies to help them work together to improve their communities, to utilise all the services that soon will be available online, to gain employment and to develop their businesses. Doesn't this seem a worthwhile cause to you?

# Community Networks in the UK

I will focus on the situation in the UK as it is the one I know the best. Community networking is a very new movement here and at the moment there is no fully rounded community network such as I have just described. However, the situation is rapidly changing and there are increasing number of projects which are providing significant services to their local community. Some of these are local authority based, others are projects of universities, community groups or local community oriented businesses, but all of them have developed partnerships with other sectors to develop a more effective service. Lets look at a few of the projects we in Communities Online are working with to get a picture of the range of projects that there are around.

## **1. Coventry and Warwickshire Network (<http://www.cwn.org.uk>)**

Coventry and Warwickshire Network began life three years ago as a project conceived by a group of environmentalists to network 'green' news and events in Coventry. They put on a public demonstration in the main local shopping centre, which attracted a lot of attention. Alas, for the environmentalists however, the interest was in the Internet and its networking capabilities rather than in the green content on display. The Coventry Environment Network quickly changed into the Coventry Community Network.

The network began as a series of ad hoc pages about the City - local museums, MPs, sport, heritage etc. put together by a team of half a dozen Net enthusiasts. It was hosted on the commercial web facilities of Ecosaurus, a local community computing company. Within three or four months, the site was beginning to receive significant numbers of email messages from around the world with a wide range of requests. A Guest book was set up for these messages and, through this, visitors started to make contact with others, particularly former school contemporaries.

Around this time Ecosaurus began work on a local European funded project to give Internet access to community organisations in the less favoured areas of the city. Participants in this project were given accredited training jointly by the University of Warwick and Ecosaurus. The final part of this training involved each organisation producing web pages that would form part of the CWN web site.

At the end of 1996. Ecosaurus, the hosting company, established its own Web servers permanently connected to the Internet. This allowed CWN to expand as there were no longer any financial constraints on the amount of web space the site could occupy. Content and usage began to grow dramatically. By May 1997 CWN had reached over 800 files of information about the area and accesses had exceeded 100,000 per month. Further developments had occurred on the technological front. In April CWN began transmitting live video pictures of the local shopping precinct, and on 2 May the first use of RealAudio was made - a roundup of the local results of the General Election.

Coventry and Warwickshire Network has now been going for 3 years, has almost a thousand pages, and has 15,000 users per month downloading 400,000 files. They also run 8 active online conferences to support interaction and the exchange of ideas. CWN receives no significant funding and there are as yet no staff employed to administer the site. All web paging preparation is done by volunteers. They have always given their services free to any community organisation, and subsidised this work by charging businesses. So far the former has greatly outpaced the latter! Their next big challenge will be setting up Public Access Points and they are investigating potential funding for small-scale pilots.

## **2. Grimethorpe Electronic Village Hall (<http://www.barnsley.demon.co.uk>)**

Grimethorpe is an ex coal mining village with massive unemployment since the coal mines closed down a few years ago. Four years ago some computer enthusiasts started a computer club there which has grown into a membership of around 50 people and calls itself: "Grimethorpe Electronic Village Hall". Because some of the original members had links with local community groups, the club began to provide technical support to the voluntary sector on a non profit basis and now have over 100 groups as their clients. For the last two years now they have been working on linking these groups up electronically. They have built a partnership with Sheffield University's Department of Information Studies and a leading Internet Service Provider and they have become the UK's first community owned and managed Internet Service Provider.

The resulting non-profit making organisation provides Internet connectivity and supplies IT support and hardware to community groups in Grimethorpe and the surrounding areas, connecting everything from youth clubs to libraries to working men's clubs. They are working closely with the community, Local Authorities and businesses in the area to provide the infrastructure and technical know-how necessary to create a Community Network. Even the local mayor of the town, has expressed an interest in having his own web site on the Internet, and the vicar of the local church already has an e-mail account with the organisation.

The aim of the project is to bring the community together and develop the necessary IT skills to generate employment in the area once known as 'the most deprived area in the UK'. At the end of last year the project gained funding to run a community access centre which is also used by schoolchildren and disabled groups. They are using volunteers to assemble computers to enable voluntary groups to get high quality equipment at the lowest possible price and had assembled over 100 computers in the first four months of this year. Now a nearby school is working with the project to enable children to build new computers for the school themselves, with the help of their parents.

The project sees its role as being to provide a complete solution to the IT needs of community and voluntary sector groups locally. They intend to provide a common and easily accessible base for people and organisations connected with the community, to develop further social intercourse and offer specialist advice on how information technology may be relevant to their business or organisation.

## **3. Newham Online**

Newham is an east London borough and is one of the most deprived areas of the UK. Newham Online is a partnership of academic, private, public and not for profit organisations working together to ensure that maximum local benefit is obtained from the development of information and communication technologies. The aim is that by the year 2005 Newham is recognised as the leading UK centre for information and communication technologies in terms of both its commercial exploitation and its use to benefit the local community

It is intended that Newham Online will co-ordinate the activities of its members so as to establish and achieve agreed goals, set-up projects to provide services to its members and develop projects to secure benefits for its members. It has just gained European Funding to enable the first two projects to be developed: the Newham Gateway and Newham Extranet.

The primary aim of the Newham Gateway will be to provide easy access for local people to local information and services. It will aim to be the first place that a local person will go when logging on to the Internet. There is an economic benefit in making it easier for people to buy locally but of course there is also an economic benefit in promoting Newham to the wider world. The Newham Gateway will support both these functions. The Newham Gateway will include a "Welcome Centre offering virtual tours of Newham, Search Services, Help, a space for user feedback, Membership Centre and Do-it-yourself store for online creativity.

The Newham Gateway will open onto the Newham extranet. The extranet is potentially a much wider project of which the Newham Gateway is a key element. It is a network of networks that share common conventions and security arrangements in order to make life easier for online users. The extranet will give access to all services and information provided by the partners in Newham Online as well as whatever resources it manages to secure for use by local people to develop their own home pages, clubs, online business and shops.

#### **4. WREN Telecottage (<http://www.nrec.org.uk/wren>)**

Warwickshire Rural Enterprise Network (WREN), a project of the National Rural Enterprise Centre (NREC), is Warwickshire's first telecottage, established in 1991 with private sector and government grants, to provide support to local businesses and communities. The telecottage aims to provide under one roof a range of local services based around computers and telecommunications, with staff to help people use the equipment.

A range of services are integrated together - training, a computerised workplace and childcare; business services, business incubation and IT support; a marketing and sub-contracting function; social events and networking opportunities. These all create synergies to stimulate small rural enterprise and new ways of working. IT training includes hands-on Email courses and Open Learning. Whilst non profit-taking, the telecottage has in the past 2 years made strides towards self-sufficiency through commercial work, which includes Word Processing and Desk Top Publishing, translation services and data management.

WREN telecottage also offers a low cost, easy access to global e-mail and information services called WRENConnect. All WRENConnect users not only receive an Internet e-mail address but also gain access to more than 190 "conferences". These contain information on a whole range of topics from UK Jobs (from the Internet), through Teleworking and Marketing to Sport and Arts & Crafts. There are also "Skills Wanted" and "Skills Offered" conferences. Many of these conferences are global, linking to the Internet or OneNet networks. The UK Jobs forum is updated daily from the Internet and often contains 50 new job opportunities a day. WREN also has its own conference.

#### **5. Sussex Community Internet Project.**

Sussex Community Internet Project works with people from local charities and voluntary organisations to understand the ways that internet and communications technology can help build stronger communities. Formed in 1995 it has built web pages, run conferences, provided hundreds of free training sessions and helped develop the use of internet across a range of organisations.

SCIP focuses its efforts on supporting the people who run community and voluntary organisations, helping them to understand the benefits of new technology and make more

effective use of their resources. This includes activities which raise awareness of what people are already doing in the local area, providing resources such as web pages and mailing lists and encouraging the provision of public access to the internet.

SCIP enjoys the support of many organisations from across the business, community and public sectors. Its most recent projects include: Brighton & Hove Virtual Festival -- five days of events, presentations and online fun, including a free cybercafe which attracted 1300 people; a community information network developed in partnership with local community groups; and a training network for local groups which work with homeless people.

SCIP provides a local focus for building and enhancing networks within the community. They rely upon charitable funding and a great deal of voluntary support.

## **What kind of services could be part of a Community Network?**

We have a growing list of services that seem to be important for community networks. They can be divided into: "Core Applications", which are central to the function of being a community network, "Essential Services" which, while not part of a community network's core business are still essential to ensuring that it will succeed, and "Desirable Services" which enhance the quality of service which can be provided within a community network.

### **Core Services:**

- Area based information e.g. population information, crime statistics
- Co-operative purchasing
- Informal discussion on council decisions
- Online entertainment area - aimed at young people
- Distance learning programmes
- Events listings
- "For sale" notices
- Job offered and wanted
- Local history database
- Local LETS groups
- Local newspaper
- web pages and lists of local organisations and clubs
- Online shopping precincts
- Arrangements for local delivery of purchases from local shops
- Volunteer centre
- Local Yellow Pages to include all services

### **Essential Services**

- Council information
- A way for the public to contact specific council officers
- Facilities for online management of the community network
- Technical Support to users
- Information & help regarding the community network
- Users personal home pages
- Welcome centre with Information, training, guided tours

### Desirable Services

- Formal consultation processes by the local council
- "Find a friend" service
- Local radio station
- Local video programming
- Online conference services
- Online meeting services
- Teleworking services
- Translation services
- Transport information
- Youth parliament

## **My personal goals regarding community networks**

My vision is that by the year 2005, every resident of Europe would have easy access to a community network in their locality. That through this, they would not only have access to comprehensive information about their community, but, much more important, they would be able to link up with people of similar interests and join with them in making their local area a better place to live and work. As large numbers of people in every locality grow confident in using the new information and communication technologies to enhance their lives and their communities, the population of Europe would become increasingly IT aware. This would enable us to play a leading role in the development of the new information industries.

The best way for this to happen is by public, private, academic and community organisations working together in every locality to bring all their resources to bear in some kind of a common strategy. It is also essential that community networks should work closely together, sharing their experience and working together collaboratively in all sorts of creative ways.

I also see community networks on the leading edge of technology development. A huge amount of expertise would be generated on collaborative work which will be of benefit to industry, business and, in fact, every aspect of life. Who better than community networks to develop user friendly technology and to pioneer the use of audio and video conferencing.

This is a big vision, but I believe it is an achievable one. It is achievable because the benefits would be enormous and would affect everyone. It is also achievable because I don't believe it would take a great deal of extra resources. The key is partnership and collaborative work. The enormous savings generated by the private, public and academic sectors working together as they all invest in new technology, would go a long way to pay for the public access and training and support needs to make sure that everyone was included.

This is my vision. What is yours?