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Connected Communities - An Overview

Introduction

What is a connected community? A connected community is more of a vision than a reality, something we're working towards.

It is a community in which all members are aware of and have access to information and communication technologies (ICTs). The central technology in connected communities is the Internet.

People in connected communities use the Internet to communicate by email and email discussion lists. They put up information on Web pages and use the Web to read and download information from around the world.

People in connected communities know all about the possibilities of ICTs and can choose to use them - when and how they want - to improve and enhance their daily lives.

They use the Internet to develop partnerships, networks, social capital and communities through supporting strong local networks. They use it to overcome the traditional disadvantages of geographic isolation.

So connected communities have become more central to our visions of healthy societies. Our challenge is that we still know very little about how to encourage connected communities.

Researchers have some ideas about this but really the experts in connected communities are community and voluntary organisations - or rather the people who work as staff and volunteers with community and voluntary organisations. It is a pleasure to see so many of you here today.

What I'd like to do this morning is to share with you some information about why you're being recognised as experts, and what it is that you know and I don't that makes you experts, and also how you can build on your expertise to develop projects for connected communities.

Why are community and voluntary organisations experts?

The answer lies in the work you are already doing in communities. Community and voluntary organisations are in many ways the core groups of society.

Look at the work you are doing. You are providing a wide range of services, support and information to your local communities, or on a regional or national level.

You are working to improve the quality of life for people living in Ireland. You are helping to empower people by providing information on a range of social issues.

Your organisations draw attention to the needs of your community or of particular groups within it, and you are finding ways to make local needs known to public authorities.

You are the ideal people to develop projects for connected communities - using digital technologies to enhance the work you are already doing in communities - because community and voluntary organisations know what's needed for healthy and vibrant communities.

What is the role of voluntary organisations across Europe?

I can tell you about some recent research into what voluntary organisations across Europe are doing in this area. Early last year, my company was contracted by the European Commission to do a study of the potential role of voluntary organisations in a more inclusive information society in Europe.

We conducted interviews in Ireland (North and South), Scotland, England, Spain, Finland and Sweden, and in two Candidate Countries - Bulgaria and Hungary. I analysed information society policies across the EU and dozens of research reports.

The report was published in October last year, and you can [download it from the Internet](#). I'd like to briefly share with you some of the study findings.

We found that voluntary organisations play an important role in a number of areas. One is training and employment in the information society. We often forget that voluntary organisations are an important source of employment across Europe.

Voluntary organisations can provide IT training to their staff, volunteers and clients. Of course, the level of training varies considerably among organisations.

Voluntary organisations also provide computer access and informal training to people experiencing disadvantage, particularly those who need training targeted to their special needs.

Another role for voluntary organisations is using the Internet to interact with government on behalf of the disadvantaged groups they work with or represent. As many of us are aware, the content on many government Web sites - although improving all the time - is not always directly accessible to people experiencing disadvantage.

Voluntary organisations can mediate this content to make it more accessible and relevant.

Voluntary organisations are also using computers and the Internet to produce community media and content online that responds to the specific needs of people experiencing disadvantage, or introduces their views and voices into a wider public sphere.

Voluntary organisations are increasing awareness of ICTs among people experiencing disadvantage in Europe, especially in areas where they are the primary providers of information, support and services to disadvantaged groups.

The point is that at European level, community and voluntary organisations are increasingly being seen as key players in strategies to develop a more inclusive information society.

The core information society policy for the European Union is called eEurope. eEurope policy is becoming more concerned with social inclusion strategies for the information society, which is a very positive development and one we should be encouraging.

The history of connected communities policy in Ireland

I would like to move on to policy development in this area in Ireland, by reviewing the history of connected community policy and the role of community and voluntary organisations.

I'm going to describe what the situation was like seven years ago, when information society policy was just starting to develop, and how policy and programmes for connected communities have evolved since then. You will appreciate how far we've come in our understanding.

The situation in Ireland, in Europe, and across the Western world, starting around 1995, was a strong focus on how the Internet was going to pay for itself, and much less focus on how digital information and services could meet the needs of people and communities, especially the people and communities most in need.

In Ireland, you may remember, that's when we first started hearing a lot about e-commerce and very little about community and voluntary organisations or connected communities. So - how is it that today there is a focus on both?

There were a number of people and groups in Ireland that encouraged the government to consider the role of community and voluntary organisations in the information society.

From 1995 to 1998 I worked with Brian Trench and Kate Ennals at Dublin City University on a research project, The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age [2]. Over the three years, we made three different submissions to the government on the role of community and voluntary organisations in the information society.

Of course, the DCU team was not the only group in Ireland highlighting the importance of community and voluntary organisations in the information society. Some community and voluntary organisations were also making submissions to the government about this.

When the Irish Information Society Commission was established in 1997, community and voluntary organisations were invited to work on its advisory committees.

Around the same time, there was a huge increase in the number of Irish community and voluntary organisations using computers and the Internet - getting email addresses, putting up Web pages.

Slowly, community and voluntary organisations across Ireland began to work on projects to use the Internet to connect with their communities. As always, however, the main challenge was funding these projects.

In 1999, the first major research on patterns of Internet use was published by the administration of the United States [3]. It showed clearly that the way the Internet was developing was very uneven and was leaving behind the most marginalised people in society. This is also known as "the digital divide."

Fortunately, the Irish Information Society Commission was fairly quick to respond to the concern that the same thing might be happening in Ireland. In 1999 they published a draft document on IT Access for All and asked the public for feedback.

There was a huge public response - I suspect more than they bargained for. Community and voluntary organisations and others who responded to this document included Age and Opportunity, the National Federation of Voluntary Bodies, the National Youth Council of Ireland, the National Women's Council, Vincentian Partnership for Justice, Visually Impaired Computer Society and the National Council for the Blind.

The Commission took the feedback on board. In early 2000, they published their first document clearly recognising the role of community and voluntary organisations in the information society [4]. At the same time, they created a new advisory group - Connected Communities.

The Connected Communities Advisory Group

The Connected Communities group met for seven months in the year 2000.

The group had 22 members, including myself. There were a few researchers, and representatives of government departments, commercial companies, and community and voluntary organisations. Our chair was Michael Byrne of Ennis Information Age Town.

Over the eight months that we existed, we did a fair bit of work to develop a policy strategy for an inclusive information society in Ireland. We first had to understand why many people in Ireland were not using the Internet.

The idea of an inclusive information society concerns a lot of people, and I'll give you an example. You may know that the government is committed to providing a new electronic system, called Reach, which will provide Web-based access to public services.

It is possible that the people in Ireland who are not using the Internet are the people most in need of the public services offered through Reach.

A key issue is whether these people are not using the Internet because they have made an informed choice, or are concerned with the cost of it, or if it has something to do with the wider issues of social inclusion.

If it's about awareness, it's possible to develop campaigns to increase awareness of the Internet and ICTs and help people make an informed choice.

If they are concerned about costs, it's possible to make the Internet and other ICTs less expensive, such as Internet access through cable television and fixed-rate Internet fees that are affordable.

However, if people are not using the Internet because of the wider issues of social disadvantage, they will need to be encouraged in other ways.

The goal then is to help to bring these people to a point where they can make up their own minds about if and how they want the Internet and other ICTs to play a role in their lives.

Research on Internet use in Ireland

The first task of our group was to focus some market research commissioned into who was using the Internet in Ireland and who was being left behind. This kind of national survey had been done before, but our group made some important changes to the questions asked.

The survey results were published by the Information Society Commission [[5](#)], and I also did an independent analysis of the survey results that was published in the Irish Times [[6](#)].

The survey found that some social groups were leading the way in Internet use, with others falling behind. There were three distinct categories of people using information and communication technologies (ICTs): a small group of early adopters, a larger group of average users, and the largest group - nonusers.

Nine per cent of Irish people surveyed were early adopters of the Internet and new technologies. The hard core of this group had monthly household incomes more than IR£3,000, came from the upper and middle classes, had a third-level education and worked in managerial and support positions

The wider group of early adopters also included a high number of students, members of the lower-middle class, people living in Dublin and other urban areas, men, and those aged 15-49.

The second category - 43 per cent - were more or less the average users of the Internet and other ICTs. In this group were many people living outside Dublin, those with a Leaving or Junior Certificate, those with monthly household incomes of IR£1,000 to IR£2,000, women, and members of the skilled working class.

Non-users made up the largest category in the survey; in the year 2000, 48 per cent of people in Ireland were not using the Internet or most other new information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Many of the hard core of non-users were people with no educational qualifications, unskilled workers, "housewives," the unemployed, those with monthly household incomes less than IR£1,000, and the over-65s.

The wider group of non-users included a high number of people over the age of 50, farmers and other agricultural workers. People with disabilities also have a low rate of ICT use.

It was clear from this research that strategies to increase Internet use in Ireland needed to be developed in the social inclusion area, alongside strategies to increase awareness of the Internet and lower the cost of using it.

We knew from our work in Ireland that social inclusion strategies need to be locally based and they need to involve community and voluntary organisations. The research gave our Connected Communities group the direction we needed to develop a strategy document for Connected Communities in Ireland that included a strong role for community and voluntary organisations. That document became a chapter in the last report of the Information Society Commission, published in December 2000 [7].

Around the time that we were ending our term on the Connected Communities committee, the Department of Public Enterprise was coming up with innovative ways to increase Internet use in Ireland - and came up with the CAIT initiative.

Through a wonderful synergy, CAIT is very much rooted in the strategies we had developed for the Information Society Commission. Most importantly, CAIT projects are developed and delivered by community and voluntary organisations.

As you know, the first round of CAIT projects began last year and today the funding has been announced for a second round, CAIT II. I'm going to give you some ideas on how to think creatively about making an application to the CAIT II Initiative.

Developing innovative ideas for CAIT II

I'm going to suggest some strategies for coming up with innovative ideas for projects CAIT II, presented here as nine points to think about before you get to the nitty-gritty of filling out the proposal application.

1. See this as an adventure! Very few of us have worked on these kinds of projects before and there are still many lessons to be learned and new things to be tried.

You may know where you're starting from and where you want to end up, but you will have no idea of what you'll encounter along the way. So - be creative, let go, and use your imaginations.

2. Identify a target group. When you have your meeting to discuss the CAIT II application, one of the first items on the agenda could be to identify a group in your community that is not using the Internet or other digital technologies, or maybe they're using mobile phones but nothing else. This will be your target group.

Your target group can be a small group or large group of people who know each other well, or a group of people who don't know each other well, or who don't know each other at all.

What they will all have in common is that they are not using ICTs to any great extent, and they have some common needs, wants or interests.

3. Identify their common needs, wants and interests. Make a list of:

- Some of the common needs of the people in your target group.
- Some of their common wants.
- Some of their common interests.

If you don't know about the needs, wants or interests of your target group, do some research: ask them! Try to list as many as possible and be as specific as possible.

4. Make a list of the ICTs you personally have experience with. Ask the members of staff and volunteers of your organisation to list all the digital information and communication technologies that they personally have some experience with and interest in. These will be the potential technologies you could consider for your CAIT project. This list could include, for example:

- email
- email discussion lists
- Web pages - this should really only be considered by organisations that already have a Web site, because developing an entire Web site can be expensive and beyond the budgets involved in the CAIT Initiative
- mobile Internet (notebook computers with wireless Internet)
- Internet access or text messaging through mobile phones
- computers
- computer peripherals such as videocams and scanners
- digital hand-held personal organisers and palm computers - this is an interesting option but be aware that a CAIT project built around palm computers may run into problems with getting insurance for these machines, which can be expensive because they are easy to lose or damage
- CD recorders and players
- digital film recorders and players
- digital cameras and software for manipulating digital images
- ICTs for people with disabilities
- other ICTs or software that you have experience with.

5. Think of innovative ways these ICTs can match the common needs, wants and interests. Come up with some ideas about how each of the digital technologies on your list can be used in new ways to meet the wants, needs and interests of your target group, who of course are not currently using these technologies.

What you want to be doing here is thinking of innovative, creative ideas. These may first seem wacky, crazy or off-the-wall, but that's what you should be aiming for during this brainstorming session.

Maybe you could give a prize for the most way-out idea - this could well end up the idea leading to a successful CAIT application!

6. Only develop the ideas that excite you. Once you have a list of ideas, you should narrow them down to the ones that your staff and volunteers are the most interested in and excited about. If you do get funding for your project, it should be something that you're really interested in and think you might enjoy.

7. Make a project plan by month. Given that CAIT II projects are more limited in time, it is important in the early stages to make a rough plan of how you would carry out your

project. You first need to decide how many months your project will take, and then, starting in month 1, write down what will need to be done in each month.

Is your project feasible in the time available? If it is, you can then draft a more detailed monthly plan. This will help when you are filling out the CAIT II application.

8. Fill out the application with as much detail as possible. It is possible for the application process to be painless for you. It is an important step in getting your project plan together. If you can provide a more detailed project plan, it will show the evaluators that you have put some thinking into it.

When filling out your application, I would strongly suggest that you don't leave it to just one person to do. This should be a group process for your organisation.

9. Share whatever tips and information you can with other community and voluntary organisations. Of course there are always concerns about competition - but you should be able to share some information with other groups applying to CAIT II if you take the approach that you can build on each others' strengths.

You should be aware of the Community Exchange email list and Web site - www.activelink.ie. Community Exchange is a place where community and voluntary organisations in Ireland share information on a range of issues. It has been running since the end of 1999 and now has more than 1,000 subscribers.

For specific advice on filling out the application, you should talk to the officials from the Department of Public Enterprise who are here today. And keep monitoring the CAIT website for information [8].

Conclusion

I would like to end my presentation by returning to my core message: YOU are the experts in how to build connected communities.

As staff and volunteers of community and voluntary organisations, you know your communities more than anyone else. You know what's needed to make your communities healthy and vibrant communities.

Many of you are working with the most marginalised community members, and you have lots of ideas about what these people need, want and are interested in.

I hope I have encouraged you to build on your expertise of community and voluntary work to think creatively about how you can encourage your own communities to be more connected using the Internet and other digital technologies.

Thank you for your attention. If you have any questions I would be delighted to answer them. I will be here all day if you want to chat. You are very welcome to email me. A copy of my presentation will soon be available on the CAIT website.

Thank you very much!

Notes:

[1] O'Donnell, Susan (2000), Towards an Inclusive Information Society in Europe: The Role of Voluntary Organisations. IST Study Report. Dublin: Itech Research.

[2] O'Donnell, Susan, Brian Trench and Kate Ennals (1998), Weak Connections: Final Report of the Research Project the Voluntary Sector in the Information Age. Dublin: Dublin City University School of Communications.

[3] US Department of Commerce (1999), Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide. A Report on the Telecommunications and Information Technology Gap in America. Washington: National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

[4] Information Society Commission (2000), IT Access for All. Dublin: ISC. March.

[5] Information Society Commission (2000), How the General Public is Adapting to the Information Society in Ireland. Dublin: ISC. October.

[6] O'Donnell, Susan (2000), " Closing the digital divide ," The Irish Times, 9 October, page 8.

[7] Information Society Commission (2000), Information Society Ireland: Third Report of Ireland's Information Society Commission. Dublin: ISC. December.

[8] CAIT web site: www.cait.ie