

Chapter VI

An Engagement Strategy for Community Network Research and Design

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the community engagement strategy of the Community Network Analysis (CNA) project and considers its significance to research and practice in socio-technical design and social networking systems within the context of community technology. CNA uses a participatory action research (PAR) methodology grounded in community development principles. Employing the Community Development Foundation's "involvement ready" model, the project adopted a mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis—community profiling, social network analysis, participatory learning workshops, and community communication space prototyping. The immersive nature of the project's engagement strategy was designed to facilitate an interpretivist understanding of the complexities of West Hove community ecology. The project's community-based participatory research approach is described together with the project's contribution to knowledge, some of its significant outputs and outcomes and the tensions between the practices of community research and community development actions.

...we must always put people before machines, however complex or elegant the machine might be.

—Cooley (1996, p. 69)

INTRODUCTION

When considering issues of import to socio-technical design and social networking systems within a context of geographic community or neighbourhood, one of the first issues facing a researcher and/or designer is the question of engagement. As outsiders to the community or neighbourhood, how do researchers and designers engage with geographic communities to design effective socio-technical systems and networks? This paper introduces the community engagement strategy of a participatory action research, (Wadsworth, 1998; and Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003) project and considers the implications of introducing a community development orientation to the research and practices of community networking.

The project in question, the 'Community Network Analysis (CNA) & ICT: Bridging and Building Community Ties' project, was funded to explore potential uses of ICT in developing and sustaining community network ties and social capital in the Portland Road and Clarendon Neighbourhood Renewal area (West Hove). The community development perspective was adopted by the CNA team because the main areas of research focus—enabling community communications and strengthening community relationships and building social capital—are significant components of community development work, (Gilchrist, 2004a).

The population of the Portland Road and Clarendon Neighbourhood Renewal¹ area is just under 11,000 (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2003). Of these, 54% are women and 46% men. 56% of the local housing stock is owner-occupied, with an increasing proportion of this stock being bought by London-based commuters. This has had the resulted in forcing house prices beyond the reach of many locals—ironic in an area where the majority of accommodation was originally built for artisans and factory workers. However, the recent construction of 'social housing' and a fairly large sector of privately rented accommodation (29%) means that the socio-economic profile of Poets Corner ranges from comfortable affluence to social deprivation and

poverty. West Hove is a multi-ethnic neighbourhood characterized by its social and cultural diversity.

Despite significant community activities—such as reclaiming Stoneham Park and the annual summer festivals and family fun days—and the best efforts of community development agencies, the grass-roots community and voluntary sector witnessed a weakening of social relationships between organizations along with an apparent growth in territorial tensions. Priorities within the community are often unclear and some local residents and community groups have been critical of the work of a number of the local community groups—perceiving them as 'closed'. In the main these perceptions arise from poor communications within the community infrastructure. Shrinking resources have meant that dialogue with the community at large is at times close to non-existent. Whilst it is fair to say that some community organizations are inward looking and inimical to new ideas and new people, significant numbers of groups are keen to engage with community citizens in a more effective and communicative manner.

The old community forum (West Hove Forum), which stagnated due to political infighting and factionalism, has been re-launched as the Portland Road and Clarendon Forum under the auspices of a community development agency—the Trust for Developing Communities. Evidence from the first year points to a desire to bridge division within the community infrastructure and collaborate for the collective good. There is a growing interest in establishing cross-community relationships and ties. Groups who hitherto felt excluded from the community infrastructure, such as the 'Bluebird Society for the Disabled' and the 'Switched On' club, which helps teenagers with special educational needs gain IT and creative skills, together with a growing number of ethnic and cultural groups, have expressed an interest in engaging in dialogic communications and community networking. We do not wish to overstate the situation at the moment because in some cases it is no more than an expression of interest. However, the fact that growing numbers in both the community infrastructure and

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