Chapter 3.11
E-News:
Community Interaction through Journalism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the development of the E-News project which examined an interactive journalism approach in Rockhampton, Australia. This project provided an opportunity to examine how the introduction of this new technology into regional media and communication brings into question the traditional roles of the journalist, the editor, the graphic designer and the audience in the production and 'consumption' of written material. Such an approach provided the opportunity for grass-roots journalism to be examined for its capacity to provide a clearer insight into the nature of a community journalism-based approach such as the E-News system. It also allowed the examination of the resultant interaction that occurs between users and community. The experiences resulting from the E-News project provide a framework for discussion regarding the potential of approaches such as E-News for community informatics in regional areas resulting from online news environment.

INTRODUCTION

Online development in the area of media and communication has taken many forms in the last decade. Information Communication Technologies (ICT) has enabled many areas which were traditionally physically orientated to emerge and explore a new dimension of online interaction. This chapter looks at the impact of community informatics on regional communities through exploration of collaborative issues in an educational context.

The nature of interaction between ICT and journalism is examined in the context of the issues that arose during the E-News project, and its implication for regional media and communication. This interaction occurred through collaboration between IT students at the University of Queensland's Ipswich campus and journalism students at the Central Queensland University's Rockhampton campus. It investigates the development and implementation of a real-life online journalism scenario.

The E-News project provided an opportunity to examine how the introduction of new technology into regional media and communication brings into question the traditional roles of the journalist, editor, graphic designer and audience in the production and 'consumption' of written material. The aims of the project were two-fold. First, it examined the development of an online environment for reliable information delivery for regional community-based journalism. The underlying assumption in this approach was that by enabling online collaboration, it is possible for a range of participants from varying backgrounds with non-technical levels of computer literacy to meaningfully interact in a news-based environment. The second aim was to examine how education could assist in addressing multi-disciplinary issues between all parties involved and the end consumers of the service: the community. The application of an educational framework to analyse a digital news perspective can reveal valuable lessons for community informatics.

The changing role of the traditional journalist because of ICT has been a rapid one. Despite this, the traditional definition of journalism has not changed, but has evolved along with the technology. Journalism still involves the collation and production of news and news articles for public consumption. What have changed are the process and the people able to conduct the preparation and publishing of news. Because of the increasing ability to post stories remotely or work online using ICT, community members can now share concerns, and provide opinions and information into the news delivery systems. This has been termed 'grass-roots journalism'. In this chapter, the use of the word 'journalist' will include a non-professional, 'grass-roots' approach, describing an individual wishing to publish community information on a topic or event. This allows discussion regarding community involvement in topics of interest to consider professionals in the same sense as those who have a view on the topic in question. By adopting such an approach, the broader issues of community informatics in regional areas can be discussed, addressing all participants on equal terms.

The following section outlines the nature of the project and the participants. It explores project aims and the mechanisms by which the project was conducted and reviewed. Studio pedagogy and its role in providing a structural framework for project development is explored while examining the impact of the technology in this process. The chapter then moves to exploring a series of broader issues, particularly the interaction between users, which arose during the project. This approach lays the framework for discussion on the potential of E-News for community informatics.

BACKGROUND — THE E-NEWS PROJECT

The overall aim of the E-News project was to develop a Web site for the creation and modification of online news stories. The site was required to be highly usable and easily updateable. The nature of the project was collaborative, involving students from Information Environments (IE) at the Ipswich campus of the University of Queensland (UQ) and E-Journalism students at the Rockhampton campus of the Central Queensland University (CQU), and conducted in the second half of the year 2000. The IE students were required to function as a team of Web designers in order to develop a fully functioning database-

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