

# Sociocultural Animation

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## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of global computer networks and the widespread availability of advanced information communication technology (ICT) since the mid-nineties has given rise to the hope that the traditional disadvantages faced by regional economies and regional communities could be alleviated easily and swiftly. Yet, the experience of both researchers and practitioners in community informatics and community development tells a different tale. Although the potential of ICT is in fact realised in some situations and locations, and does provide a means to ensure sustainability in some regional communities, elsewhere it has not achieved change for the promised better. Too many communities are still faced by a centralised structure in the context of commerce, service provision or governance and by various degrees of digital divides between the connected and disconnected, between the media literate and illiterate, between young and old, between consumers and producers, and between urban and rural.

Many attempts to close or bridge the digital divide have been reported with various degrees of success (e.g., Menou, 2001; Servon, 2002). Most of these accounts echo a common voice in that they report similar principles of action, such as people-centred approaches, and they reflect and advocate—in most cases unconsciously—practices of sociocultural animation.

This article seeks to shed light onto the concept of sociocultural animation—a concept which is already commonplace in various forms in the arts, in education and professional development, youth work, sports, town planning, careers services, entrepreneurship and tourism. It starts by exploring the origins of sociocultural animation and draws comparisons with the current state of research and practice. It unpacks the foundation of sociocultural animation and briefly describes underlying principles and how they can be applied in the context of community informatics and developing regional communities with ICT.

## BACKGROUND

Before the dominant meaning of the term “animation” was taken over by the film and computer graphics indus-

tries which ‘animate’ virtual characters, avatars and cartoons, it was—and still is—used to describe the act of encouraging, motivating, involving, empowering, engaging real human beings. The word derives from the Greek/Latin “anima” which means “life” or “soul” and thus stands literally for the act of giving life or spirit to someone or something, or the state of being alive.

Most current accounts of sociocultural animation trace its origin back to post WW2 France where “animation socioculturelle” “was discovered as a way of invigorating democratic values lost as a result of the occupation and other wartime hardships” (Kurki, 2000, p. 162). It has also been suggested that the French colonial heritage made for an invigorating environment in which previous traditions aimed at rather dubious objectives overseas could be re-purposed mainly to animate French youth for leisure activities in, e.g., “maisons des jeunes et de la culture” (youth and cultural centres), “centres sociaux” (social centres) or “maisons de quartier” (community centres) (Cannan & Warren, 1997).

The concept of sociocultural animation spread throughout Europe in the 1970s when the increasingly self-confident community arts movement (known as “neighbourhood arts” in North America) was first being recognised and taken seriously by the established arts institutions and by public cultural policy makers. Previously, two misconceptions were prevalent: First, art is not created by “the plebs” but by few highly talented artists who create cultural works of supreme value; second, cultural development will occur in society by simply exhibiting these works. Thus, conventional arts policy at the time aimed at the “democratisation of culture” by fostering the dispersion of cultural institutions such as opera houses, theatres, galleries and museums, and by funding professional artists only (Adams & Goldbard, 1990; for an American perspective see Levine, 1988).

Advocates of “cultural democracy” opposed these notions and—initially through the work of the Council for Cultural Cooperation (CCC), part of the Council of Europe (cf. [www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int))—introduced a broader notion of sociocultural animation to a wider political arena. Sociocultural animation was defined as all actions which are “concerned to offer each individual the means and the incentive to become the active agent of his own development and of the qualitative development of the community to which he belongs” (Grosjean & Ingberg, 1974, p. 4). The notion of

“democratising culture” was regarded as “patronising”; instead, the idea of “cultural democracy” suggests that “culture is synonymous with movement, and that each individual must not only be entitled to acquire culture, but also have full control over how that culture is defined” (Grosjean & Ingberg, 1974, p. 7).

Parallels can be drawn to today’s information society which still tries to come to terms with the vast opportunities ICT offers and to find best practices to “democratise” ICT and internet access, effective usage and the role of government itself. The foundation of sociocultural animation holds some insights and opens up perspectives which present-day community informatics researchers and practitioners may find useful and may benefit from.

## **THE FOUNDATION OF SOCIOCULTURAL ANIMATION**

Kurki distinguishes three dimensions of sociocultural animation: “The educational goal is personal development; the social goal is to reinforce the group and the community and to increase people’s participation; the cultural dimension, in turn, aims at developing creativity and many-sided expression” (Kurki, 2000, p. 163). These three dimensions and their underlying principles and practices are explored in the following in the context of community informatics.

### **The Social Dimension**

Anthropologists and sociologists have created a plethora of definitions for the term “community” with the only common term of reference being “people”. The social dimension of sociocultural animation refers to a people-centred approach that is guided by the imperatives of personal and group participation (cf. Gumucio Dagron, 2001). In the field of community informatics, areas of application include sociocultural animation and ICT for developing countries (Gonzalez & Fernandez, 1990), communities of practice (Millen & Fontaine, 2003; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), and residential community networks (Foth, 2004), especially in the context of networked individualism (Wellman, 2001) and social networks (Watters, 2003).

### **The Cultural Dimension**

Apart from the before mentioned prominence of sociocultural animation in European public policy making under the influence of the cultural democracy movement, it also implies a more simple and immediate cultural dimension in that it encourages people and community members

to express themselves creatively through the arts. This dimension of sociocultural animation evokes the emergence of cultural heritage and gives rise to the formation of community memory. Smith (2002) illustrates the cultural dimension through the work of Brazilian theatre director and writer Augusto Boal and the “Theatre of the Oppressed” or “Forum Theatre” which is used as a way of developing creativity and eliciting an emotional response to political and economic questions from working class people.

Certain arts practices, especially dance, theatre and drama continue to play a significant role today in school education, youth and community work. One example of this use of sociocultural animation are the Rock Eisteddfod festivals in Australia ([www.rockchallenge.com.au](http://www.rockchallenge.com.au)) which combine choreography, costume and stage design, music and dance to animate not only youth but also parents, teachers and the wider community.

In the context of developing regional communities with ICT, the possibilities within the nexus of sociocultural animation and new forms of creative expression afforded by digital technology are just beginning to be explored. A prominent example in community informatics is digital storytelling which usually takes the form of a personal movie which integrates photographs, music, video, and voice (Freidus & Hlubinka, 2002). Digital storytelling workshops have been employed by both researchers (for a streaming media example, see Hartley, Hearn, Tacchi, & Foth, 2003) and practitioners (cf. [www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales](http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales)).

### **The Educational Dimension**

“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn,” a proverb attributed to Benjamin Franklin, summarises the educational dimension of sociocultural animation.

From early misuse during WW2 where forms of sociocultural animation have been applied in Germany to develop a social environment consistent and favourable with the Nazi regime and ideology (Sunker & Otto, 1997), it has now found its legitimate place in the field of social pedagogy in Germany (Moser, Müller, Wettstein, & Willener, 1999) and other European countries (cf. [www.enoa.de](http://www.enoa.de) and Lorenz, 1994), including Spain (Ander-Egg, 1997) and Finland (Kurki, 2000). In France, sociocultural animation is well established as an independent profession of “animateurs” who work in various social, cultural and educational contexts (Augustin & Gillet, 2000; Gillet, 1995; Mignon, 1999).

Effective use of ICT in a community context often requires training. The educational dimension of sociocul-

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