

Community Networks

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INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of community networks in the 1980s, several authors have put forth a number of different definitions of the concept. The definitions included below emphasize certain key elements of community networks and comprise a representative sample of views regarding this phenomenon. The Association for Community Networking (AFCN), for instance, defines community networks as “projects that bring local people together to discuss their community’s issues and opportunities, learn about Internet technology, and decide upon and create services to address these community needs and opportunities” (AFCN, n.d.). Furthermore, according to the AFCN, there is a “special focus on including those who are traditionally left out of community decision making in general, and technology decision making in particular (e.g., low-income, minorities, senior citizens).” Broadly speaking, community networks are designed, created, and implemented with the purpose of “improving communities—in the social, political and economic realms” (O’Neil, 2002). Indeed, “networks are sometimes defined as communities themselves.” A common theme among the various definitions is the belief that networks should create a little self-contained part of cyberspace. Thus, a community network could be construed “as a mini-Internet, only open to members of the community” (Vazquez, 2003). Another important aspect of community networking is the capacity of the Internet and e-mail to aid in community development, in that they “provide access to a new mode of social interaction, one that virtualizes community development processes” (Graham, 1996). Ultimately, community networks and the relationships that develop among the participants make up what has been called an “electronic greenbelt to reinforce and add value to the community” (Cisler, 1993). Schuler (1996) defines community networks as “community-based computer networks ... intended to help revitalize, strengthen and expand existing people-based community networks (p. 25). Based on the previous definitions, we postulate our own definition of community networks as organizations that help to strengthen real communities through the creation of vir-

tual communities, not as a substitute for but as a complement to real communities. Typically these community networks are created to address specific local needs involving expansion of Web access to underserved segments of the community but often end up embracing the enhancement of other forms of social, political and economic access as well. Furthermore, as we discuss in some of the sections below, governments can have an important role in sponsoring community networks but, in general, these networks are the offshoots of community activists-volunteers serving in a nonofficial capacity. This allows them to take positions contrary to those of the government(s) serving the jurisdictions that the community networks are in.

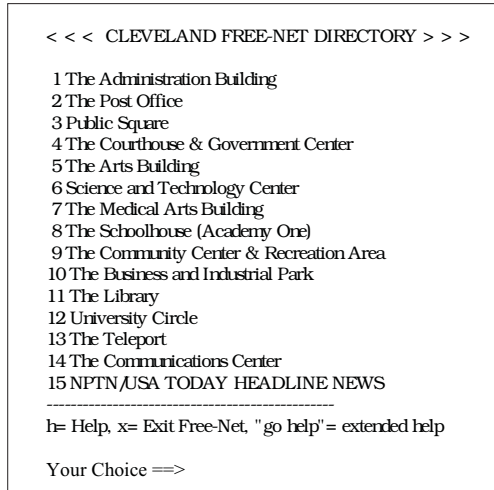
BACKGROUND: BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMUNITY NETWORKING

The following brief history of community networks focuses on a very small number of exemplary cases. A complete chronology and exhaustive list of community networks is beyond the scope of the present work. Furthermore, the focus of this history is limited to community networks within the U.S. The authors recognize the increasing importance of community networks elsewhere, however. Nevertheless, the scope of this article necessarily limits our focus to the U.S. It may, in fact, be the case that community networks outside the U.S. are more vibrant and represent a true growth area for community nets. Community networking originated before the advent of personal computers in the late 1970s. Early community networks had something of a 1960s countercultural quality about them at the beginning with the very first community network system, Community Memory in Berkeley, California, which was started in the early 1970s and featured a preponderance of content regarding local rock bands, particularly the Grateful Dead (Schuler, 1996).

With the growing popularity of personal computers in the early 1980s, community networks started to emerge around the U.S. In 1986, the first free-net (see Figure 1) was created. The Cleveland Free-Net in Cleveland, Ohio, be-

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Figure 1.



gan as a bulletin board for medical information, “St. Silicon’s Hospital and Information Dispensary,” and sponsored by Case-Western Reserve University. Users could log-on and leave medical- or health-related questions on the bulletin board, which would be answered within 24 hours by a physician. The project was expanded with funding provided by AT&T and the University Hospitals of Cleveland and the state of Ohio. The information was organized in “town buildings,” which could be “visited” by the user:

At the height of its popularity in the early 1990s, the Cleveland Free-Net had over 40,000 registered users (Schuler, 1995).

The Santa Monica Public Electronic Network (PEN) was started in 1989, and in contrast to the two networks mentioned previously, was one of the first to be sponsored by a municipal government. PEN was designed to pursue a number of participatory democratic objectives including:

- Providing easy electronic access to public information
- Providing an alternative means of communication from residents to convey their needs, preferences and intentions to local government
- Facilitating the delivery of local public services to residents
- Serving as a public forum for the expression of opinions on a wide range of issues and concerns of residents to enhance their sense of community

- Providing community members with the means to learn about computer and communications technology

One observer of the experiment notes that its goal from the beginning was to empower the residents of Santa Monica (McKeown, 1991). A key reason for this sense of empowerment was the availability of public computer terminals in libraries and other public places, which allowed even the most disadvantaged community members to participate in the network. Another important aspect of PEN was an attempt to use the nature of online communications to level the playing field of civic engagement; without visible social cues, in theory everyone can participate without the detrimental effects of prejudice. However, this absence of a social context can enable negative behaviors as well. For example, the practice of “flaming”—or exchanging insults online—was alive and well on PEN, even though its creators required participants to use their real names online in order to make it the setting less conducive to abusive behavior.

The Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV), which still exists (as does the Santa Monica PEN, although it has apparently become part of the Santa Monica city government’s Web site), is the result of a unique experiment involving Virginia Tech, Bell Atlantic Southwest and the Town of Blacksburg, Virginia. BEV was created in 1993, to serve as a “virtual community,” or as an online location where all the different types of activities (e.g., political activism, social organizing and commercial endeavors) that occur in a physical community can occur via computer network. Unlike the other community networks discussed, the creators of the Blacksburg Electronic Village from the start envisioned that their “wired city” concept would have considerable e-commerce potential. Thus, local businesses lent their support to the installation of a network connection for every home, classroom and business in the city. So that, in addition to the standard provision of information about local events, issues and concerns, the network also provides local businesses with an electronic means to deliver new products and information about services to the residents. According to the BEV Web site, “in 1998, the BEV turned over its residential Ethernet operations to the private sector, again creating new jobs and new business opportunities in the region. By late 1997, there were at least 24 new high tech businesses in the Blacksburg area providing a wide range of Internet services, consulting, hardware, and programming services. . . . Today, the BEV group works closely with the Town of Blacksburg, local civic groups, businesses, and individual citizens to ensure that these new communications tools are used to support the every day human activities of Blacksburg.”

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