Chapter IX

Holistic Evaluation of the Roles of ICTs in Regional Development

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Abstract

Regional Australia continues to be the recipient of public programs premised on assumptions about the benefits of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) related development, at the same time as it is experiencing a reduction in basic services and problems associated with the digital divide. From a research perspective, these circumstances pose challenges on how to evaluate meaningfully the impacts of ICTs on regional development. These challenges are compounded by the considerable confusion that exists over what is meant by regional development, how it can be achieved, and how to measure and evaluate the role ICTs play in reviving and sustaining regional communities. The exploratory research reported in this chapter examines the issues surrounding what is meant by ICT-related development in a regional context. It also explores the usefulness of multiple measures, as opposed to single measures, to describe what in reality is a very complex process. In this context, the chapter outlines the preliminary development of, and the rationale behind, a holistic approach for evaluating the role of ICTs in regional development, based on insights generated from ongoing research in Tasmania.
Introduction

The role of ICT ... in economic growth and social change has received considerable attention in recent years [but] ... reliable and comprehensive indicators are needed to track developments in new information technologies and understand their impacts on our economies and societies. (OECD, 2002, p. 3)

Community informatics researchers are well aware of the huge volume of literature on the impact of ICTs on economic (particularly urban) development. This discourse often relies on a simplistic assumption that “what is good for the economy is good for the community.” Too frequently their attempts to assess the impact of technology adoption on the social fabric of communities have been marginalized by the prevalence of this “dominant discourse.” While it is clearly problematic to marginalize questions relating to the influence of ICTs on the social framework of communities, particularly in regional areas, it does highlight the challenges that need to be overcome if more effective ICT-related interventions are to be designed, initiated and implemented.

In examining the role of ICTs on regional areas it is easy to be in support of the need for a recalibration from purely economic indicators to an aggregation of indicators encapsulating social and community dimensions. It is however, considerably more difficult to identify those indicators and the mechanisms for their meaningful aggregation. This is the case in regional Australia, where even obtaining an official and consistent definition of “regional” is fraught with difficulties. Indeed, while linking economic, social, and community factors together is an important and worthy step, it has not led to the identification of mechanisms for achieving such a meaningful aggregation (Steer & Turner, 2004).

The exploratory research reported in this chapter aims to contribute to an understanding of the issues surrounding what is meant by ICT-related development in a regional context. It outlines the development of a holistic approach for evaluating the role of ICTs in regional development, based on insights generated from ongoing research into the impact of ICT-based projects in Tasmania.

ICTs and Regional Development

Despite the difficulties of defining “regional” that have been considered elsewhere (Steer & Turner, 2004), it is evident that the overall trends of slower industrial growth, decreasing rural populations, and the emergence of issues associated with the adequacy and/or affordability of telecommunications are very much a part of the everyday experience of the information economy for many Australians in regional areas, outside of the main metro area (DCITA, 2002).

In this context, it is not surprising that there has been considerable support for the deployment of ICTs as a mechanism to revitalise regional Australia. However, while ICTs clearly have the potential to connect regional Australia to the world, their impacts have been far from uniform and not always beneficial. ICTs and in particular e-commerce “raises the possible outcome of increased market share and dominance of large urban based companies in
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