Chapter X

Information Access in Rural Communities: Bridging the Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

The concept of ‘digital divide’ draws attention to the social context of technology usage. Current IT solutions are technology driven and are focussed on elite consumers in cities. In contrast, regional Australian communities face a number of problems such as remoteness, small population and distance. Knowledge and resource constraints also impact on these communities and businesses. Any attempt to transform regions using new information and communications technologies should take into consideration these unique factors.

This chapter focuses on information access in two rural communities in Western Australia. A qualitative study followed by a quantitative phase in
two regional towns explored how people access information and where information gaps lie. Results of this research suggest that, along with technical infrastructure, equal emphasis should be placed on the human/community element. Without this, regional transformation will remain mere rhetoric.

INTRODUCTION

Like the industrial revolution of earlier centuries, the current information revolution continues to have significant social and economic impact. The industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries brought about dramatic changes in the production of goods, and through this, significantly altered the way of life. Goods that were not previously within the reach of many people became affordable, raising the standard of living. Building on the industrial revolution, the technological revolution in the post-World War II era has touched on every aspect of life, in ways that one could not have imagined a few decades earlier. The information revolution of the 1990s also seems to be heading in a similar direction. Information that was within the reach of an elite few, or which could not be accessed because of distances or national or geographic boundaries, is now available to practically everyone. Likewise, communicating information to others has also become generally less expensive and easier because of the Internet.

However, such revolutions also appear to have their dark side. A significant body of historical evidence has emerged which suggests that while the positive impacts of industrial and technological revolution have been truly outstanding, it has also had some grave negative consequences. The socio-economic chasm between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ continues to widen between countries, between socio-economic groups within countries, and between individuals. The very revolution that was supposed to bridge the social gap by making goods and services affordable has widened inequities. And now, the potential of the ‘information revolution’ or the ‘digital revolution’ to create a socio-economic divide is well recognised in the literature.

Underpinning the information revolution and the development of information technology tools are the assumptions that information is power, and that more information will lead to better decision making. However, in a rush to embrace, or move ahead with, information technology, many fundamental questions have been ignored or have not been considered in depth; for example, do people need information, what type of information is needed, and how do they access such information? Yet another dimension is that, in most of the information technology system development to date, IT solutions have tended to focus on individual businesses and large clients or large client bases such as major population
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