Chapter XI

Online Services and Regional Web Portals: Exploring the Social and Economic Impacts

Helen Thompson
University of Ballarat, Australia

Abstract

This chapter examines community empowerment, economic and business development, and equity of service as the issue of success and decline in regional and rural communities is explored with a particular focus on community informatics initiatives (CI). In Australia, there has been a vision for online services to be used to open up regional communities to the rest of the world. Government support has been seen as enhancing the competence levels of local communities so they become strong enough to deal equitably in an increasingly open marketplace. But how effective have regional portals and other online initiatives been? This chapter explores whether economic and social benefits are generated via establishing and sustaining regional CI initiatives. Theory relevant to online communities is introduced to provide a context for the presentation of two case studies. The dissemination of the critical learning from these cases can inform others about the diverse factors which impact on the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of regional CI initiatives.
Introduction

Information communications technology (ICT) has been identified as a key enabler in the achievement of regional and rural success, particularly in terms of economic and business development. The potential for achieving equity of service through improved communications infrastructure and enhanced access to government, health, education and other services has been identified. ICT has also been linked to the aspiration of community empowerment where dimensions include revitalising a sense of community, building regional capacity, enhancing democracy and increasing social capital.

There has been strong support for the view that the information economy will play a seminal role in the growth of regional and rural Australia. Online capabilities and services have been promoted on the basis that they can build stronger and more viable regional communities with enhanced investment, employment and skills, and improved quality and convenience of life. ICT has also been identified as providing opportunities to “level the playing field” with access increasingly being seen as critical for both economic and social well-being. Benefits have been espoused in terms of “location independence” and the end of the “tyranny of distance” (Department for Information Technology and the Arts, 1998; Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, 2000; Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts and National Office for the Information Economy, 2000). In terms of enhancing community well-being, it has been argued that online capabilities can help to stimulate and reinvigorate geographic communities and communities of interest.

There has been considerable interest in promoting ICT and e-commerce uptake for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with the role of local government in promoting SME uptake receiving consideration (Surridge, 2000; Romm and Taylor, 2001; SkillsNet Association Co-operative Limited, 2001; Jakobs, 2002). Summary case studies have been presented to demonstrate how individual businesses have adopted and benefited from ICT and e-commerce (Department of Communications and the Arts and AUSe.NET Australian Electronic Business Network, 1998; Papandrea, 1998; National Office for the Information Economy, 2000; Papandrea and Wade, 2000; Ernst & Young and Multimedia Victoria, 2002). These are, however, generally very brief accounts which lack detail in terms of the processes, the challenges, the evaluation approach and actual outcomes (both expected and unexpected). In terms of community informatics literature, the focus tends to be either on discrete ICT initiatives or on telecentres. There is scant literature which explores how communities can establish web-based services which support local community goals, whether they are social, economic or environmental.

A raft of government policies and programs has been launched and reports published and disseminated, based around the theme of ICT and online capabilities. However, a range of barriers continues to impede uptake, particularly in regional and rural areas. Issues which have been explored include the “digital divide” and “equity of access.” While it is has been argued that regional and rural communities require first class infrastructure to harness the power of ICT (Victorian Government, 2002), others, perhaps more realistically, state that the goal of true equity of access may never be achieved (Hunter, 1999; Fong, 2001). Hunter, for example, believes that regional Australia must
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