14. Community Development and the Internet

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Situating the Potential: New Digital Opportunities for Communities?

The global information society seems to be a fact. It is widely assumed that the so-called new economies will bring new digital opportunities for all. The only problem seems to be how to bridge the so-called digital divide and to train people to use the new information and communication technologies (ICTs). The final report of the Digital Opportunity Task Force (DOT Force, 2001), that was created by the G8 Heads of State to analyze the digital divide and the opportunities of ICTs for social and economic development, speaks of “a historic moment” and a “digital revolution”. The report formulates the potentials of ICTs as follows: “Despite recent turbulence in the so-called “new economy”, it is undeniable that the world is in the midst of a set of profound changes that create enormous new opportunities, while posing equally daunting challenges. Precisely because the digital revolution has the power to transform production processes, commerce, government, education, citizen participation and all other aspects of our individual and collective lives, it can create substantial new forms of economic growth and social development. Therefore, access to, and effective use of the tools and networks of
the new global economy, and the innovations they make possible, are critical to poverty reduction, increased social inclusion and the creation of a better life for all.”

As a result of the new potentials that ICTs are said to offer, the concept of ‘community’ has also been pushed to the front again.¹ There seem to be two explanations for this new association between ICTs and the concept of community. First, community has always been associated with networking. What has been centralized in many approaches to the concept of community and community development is the (direct) interaction between people (participation). The new ICTs and especially the internet open new ways of participatory communication for community networking. Second, in many development approaches, the concept of community is considered to be the primary focus of many development programs. Moreover, in the debates on globalization versus localization, the localization side of the continuum is often put into operation by focussing on the community. Combining these already established interests in the community with the new digital possibilities accounts for another explanation of the renewed interest. Community development programs now try to benefit from the advantages that the new ICTs and especially the internet can offer. This contribution focuses on both areas in the use of ICTs and the internet for community development.

An obvious question to begin with is: What are the advantages of internet over other media forms? Why do we want to use the internet when it comes to community development? There seem to be at least four advantages:
1. *The increase in speed*. Information travels much faster and is more mobile with the internet (including email) in comparison to other media forms such as snail mail.

2. *The decrease in costs*. The idea here is that costs will be reduced for the end user. This is only true if other conditions are met. For instance, infrastructure needs to be available and costs for the end user also depend on the costs of access.

3. *The possible integration and convergence of different media forms*. The technology of the internet opens the possibility of integrating and converging different media forms like text, audio, visuals and moving pictures. In the long run, the internet might even converge regular radio, television and telephone.

4. *The possibility of interactivity and especially the consultation of information*. When discussing the possibilities of the internet, the concept of interactivity is often mentioned. This is of course very important for community development, but certainly not the only or even most important advantage of the internet. The essence of the World Wide Web is not interactivity. It is consultation. This means that information is stored on different servers and in different databases around the world. This information can be consulted at any time from any place, provided the conditions of infrastructure, access and skills are met.

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A Technological Perspective Versus a Culturalistic Perspective on Community Development

Internet and email do have advantages, also for community development and the digital divide is real. There exists a widening gap between access to ICTs in the Northern countries and access in the Southern countries. But, we need to be very cautious in applying such one-sided technological determined perspective on development, social change and democratic processes. Questions too often only address the technological (hardware) based advantages and/or the policies regarding bridging the digital divide. When the end users are included—if they are included at all—they are reduced to figures. We also need to address questions concerning software and the use of the software, like: what kind of information is relevant; who needs this information, and who decides if people need it; who uses the new technology and who profits from that use? These kinds of questions need to be addressed from a more culturalistic perspective on the internet and community development. After all, the digital divide is primarily the result of inequality, not the cause.

We can distinguish between two perspectives on the internet in relation to community development. The first, and most dominant perspective is the technological-economic perspective. The second is the culturalistic perspective. Most visions on development and development communication are still of a technological and economic nature. This, despite the fact that many practitioners and academics have pointed to the inhuman and structural focussed aspects of such a view. For instance, the debate on the causes and solutions of the digital divide uses primarily a technological, economic and policy oriented discourse. A genuine social and cultural vision is lacking. What follows is a summary of the main
characteristics of both perspectives on community development and the role of different media forms, among which ICTs and the internet.
Fig. 1. Characteristics of a culturalistic and technological-economic perspective on community development

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<th>Characteristics of a technological-economic perspective on community development</th>
<th>Characteristics of a culturalistic perspective on community development</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Close association with political development, policy and regulatory reform.</td>
<td>• Close association with social development, processes of democratization and human rights.</td>
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<td>• The total development of a community equals the economic development of that community. Technological development is a necessity for economic development. Social and cultural development is a(n) (automatic) spin-off of economic development.</td>
<td>• The total development of a community is of an economic-political nature as well as of a socio-cultural nature. Both aspects are given equal attention, but the economic-political development should serve the socio-cultural development. Technological-economic development is not a goal in itself.</td>
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<td>• The perspective is ‘from the outside in’ and ‘from the top down’. Human beings are primarily seen as economic factors.</td>
<td>• The perspective is ‘from the inside out’ and ‘bottom up’. Human beings are primarily seen as socio-cultural actors.</td>
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| • The guiding objective is to offer media forms and ICTs to bridge the digital divide and thus (automatically) close the information gap between and within communities. The perspective is technology and media centered. | • The guiding objective is to offer relevant, cultural, and social sensitive information. The media form (which can include ICTs and the internet) is chosen accordingly. The perspective is information/software and socio-cultural centered.
Communities in Digital and Civil Action

When discussing social and community development from a culturalistic perspective, it is especially within civil society and within movements such as the indigenous and ethnic movements, the women movement, the anti-globalization movement, and the new democratic and social movements in general that communities are active in their use of the internet. New communities are formed and existing communities are expanded by the use of the new digital networking possibilities. These so-called new ‘virtual communities’ or ‘digital networks’, using the internet as communication technology, are often contrasted with ‘real life communities’ (see for instance Van Dijk, 1998; Hollander, 2000:372). “In this dichotomy ‘virtual community’ usually refers to geographically dispersed, internet based virtual communities of interest, whereas the ‘real life community’ stands for a geographically based community grounded in face-to-face-interactions between members” (Hollander, 2000:372; emphasis added). Pointing at the issue of geography seems indeed a common, useful and in this case sufficient way to define the difference. The ‘geographically dispersed communities’ relate to issues of community building for localized and/or democratic development in, and through the use of cyberspace. Therefore, we can call them ‘cyberspace based communities’. What will be addressed in discussing these kinds of communities are aspects of communication within and between civil society communities and civil society organizations (CSOs). The relation with the average citizen is also of importance.

With ‘geographically based communities’ and their use of the internet, the situation seems to be different. The issue here is that an existing community uses the internet as a tool for development.
The internet and email are considered to be relevant media for development goals. The question that thus becomes of relevance to the case of ‘geographically based communities’ is: How can relevant information that is available on the internet be made accessible to a community and thus serve the community? From a technological-economic perspective, this question primarily addresses hardware and infrastructure related problems (access). From a culturalistic perspective, this question also includes software and content related problems (relevance).

In the next part, I want to consider both—the ‘cyberspace based communities’ and the ‘geographically based communities’. Both kinds of communities will be related to development and the internet. First, the focus will be on ‘cyberspace based communities’. In discussing the potentials of these kinds of communities, two issues will be addressed: 1. on-line community dialogue, and, 2. on-line community networking and getting the word out. But to whom? Second, it will be discussed how the internet can serve existing ‘geographically based communities’ by making the internet and email available to the community. Several cases will be provided.

‘Cyberspace Based Communities’

On-Line Community Dialogue
The internet can play a significant role in increasing the participation in a community and by doing so increase the representation of the community as a whole. An increase in dialogue (quantitative as well as qualitative through the possibilities of this new technology) leads to an increase in quality. This process can relate to the core members as well as to grassroots supporters of any kind of organization or community.
Any increase in participation is in itself a democratic development. Every community, be it a nation, the United Nations, a government, a company, a NGO or any kind of community of interest is somehow represented through an image and an identity, e.g. in the case of a company: a corporate image and a corporate identity. The quality of this image/identity is highly dependent on the participation of the members and grassroots supporters in the process of constructing this image/identity. Therefore, the use of ICTs and the internet can increase the quality of the image/identity of a community by increasing the participation of its members. If, for instance, we take the case of citizens actively participating in civil society, the quality of the image/identity of civil society can improve by stimulating internet-based communication. If the citizens have cheaper, faster and more efficient and effective means of communication, this can only have a positive effect on quality. Also in the case of the European Community, ICTs and the internet can help establish a better image and firmer identity of the Community. The new communication and information technologies simply offer a new way for internal (civil) communication.

This kind of use of ICTs is marginal in the so-called developing countries. A basic condition for this kind of democratization is the availability of hardware and infrastructure for the community members. This condition is not met in many ‘Third World’ countries. Even in the so-called ‘First World’ such a penetration is not guaranteed everywhere. Especially the internet is often directly associated with democracy and freedom, with access being the key word. The assumption is that if access is guaranteed, this will lead to more knowledge and more transparency, and consequently to more democracy. But, if infrastructure and access are missing, as it is the case in many developing countries, other forms of
communication—like radio, press, folk media—could be promoted in order to reach the same goals of democracy. Another possibility could be that internet is integrated from within one of these more ‘traditional’ media like radio (see Case Sri Lanka: Kothmale Community Radio). Too often ICTs are opted for where other media could be more appropriate. In a culturalistic perspective on development, such a media-centered focus is rejected because, among other things, it is not realistic to assume that developing countries will have a similar level of ICT-penetration as the ‘First World’ countries.

In the so-called ‘First World’, but even more important, in the world of international cooperation, access to ICTs and skills to use the ICTs seem to be sufficiently available. ICTs can thus play a significant role in the process of ‘participation in representation’ in civil society. All kinds of organizations and communities are formed through so-called ‘email lists’ and ‘newsgroups’. In this way, they increase the quality of their representation by participating in the group’s communication. This kind of internal civil communication thus refers primarily to communication within civil society organizations (CSOs) striving for external processes of democratization. These kinds of communities often work in the area of ‘counter action’ and are nationally and internationally organized around themes such as politics, environment, democracy and human rights.

The case to illustrate the use of internet for internal civil communication within ‘cyberspace based communities’ is Soc.Culture.Singapore. It concerns a virtual civil society community, which has a spontaneous origin. As such it is not related to an organized CSO, but concerns a less formalized way of community building through internal civil communication.
Case Singapore: *Soc.Culture.Singapore*

One of the early and international acknowledged examples of internet use for internal civil communication can be found in Singapore. In January 1993, the newsgroup *Soc.Culture.Singapore* (SCS) was established. Shortly after, in the years 1994 and 1995 the USENET-newsgroup was widely known as a forum where the actions of the Government of Singapore were discussed from a democratic angle. From mid-1994 until mid-1995 over 10,000 messages were sent to this newsgroup. Today, Singaporeans, but also non-Singaporeans can still send so-called *postings* or *articles* to the members of the newsgroup. The discussion is open and unmoderated. What is exceptional here is that critique can be given uncensored and can be consulted in the newsgroup itself and through the web site *Singapore Internet Community* (SInterCom) ([http://www.sintercom.org](http://www.sintercom.org)). However, it is also voiced that all messages on SCS are closely monitored by the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA). It is also said that young members of The People’s Action Party (PAP) began sending pro-PAP *postings* to the newsgroup. “This PAP presence becomes especially evident during certain debates, such as that which transpired in 1995 over the appropriateness or otherwise of Prime Minister Goh being awarded an honorary degree from Williams College in the U.S. Protesters argued that the curbs on free speech and critical inquiry in Singapore under Goh rendered any award from an American university offensive. In the various exchanges on *Soc.Culture.Singapore*, the stance by Young PAP was bolstered by the appearance of a spokesperson on behalf of the Ministry of Information and the Arts, who attacked government critics and played a custodial role for the PAP’s position” (Rodan, 1997).

Today there are thousands of these kinds of newsgroups and related web sites. Some of these communities are moderated and others are not, but they all have in common that information and opinions are posted for immediate or archived consultation. Besides actively sending *postings* to the group, consulting the information increases participation in the specific community. The representation of the community is thus bundled and intensified by the use of ICT, in this case an internet based newsgroup. Critics have found a platform to express their critiques and improve their communication capacity as individuals but under the umbrella of a community.

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1 The *NOT* *The Straits Times Forum Page* can also be consulted at this web site. At the site, you can read letters that were rejected for publication in the *Forum*
Another case of increased representation caused by increased participation in dialogue is provided by so-called electronic conferences or on-line forums. These kinds of virtual gatherings can take different forms, but the core is that discussion and information exchange takes place in a virtual community that is created by email connections. Most forums of this kind have a less spontaneous character than the USENET-based newsgroups, like Soc.Culture.Singapore. Electronic forums range from simple theme oriented LISTSERV- or MAJORDOMO-based email lists, to more short-term and direct goal-oriented conferences. The goals of the dialogues within these communities also differ. Some are established to discuss issues prior to, and in preparation of a face-to-face meeting. Other objectives can be to establish consensus among the community members. Still others discuss issues and share information about geographical regions or countries, or discuss issues within domains such as human rights, media and democracy, minority groups, etc. Often the discussion is archived and made accessible through a web site and is often framed by other relevant information at the web site.

One important characteristic of electronic conferences, in contrast to open lists and USENET newsgroups, is that the discussion is often guided by questions that are formulated by the initiator, who is also often the moderator of the meeting. The goal of these questions is to focus the discussion. This makes the role of the
moderator very important. Moreover, as with ‘real life’ conferences, there is often a set time period for the discussion. An example of such an electronic conference is provided in the case AR-WACC On-Line Forum on “Communication for Reconciliation in the Asian Context”.

Case: AR-WACC On-Line Forum on “Communication for Reconciliation in the Asian Context”

This electronic conference was organized by the Asia Regional (AR) Association of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC). Initially, the idea was to have the on-line forum up and running from 17 September 1999 until 30 November 1999. This to support the General Assembly and seminar on “Communication for Reconciliation in the Asian Context” that was held in Hong Kong from 25 until 31 October 1999. The forum intended to have discussions prior to the General Assembly and seminar, as well as until one month after the seminar to allow post-seminar discussions. Eventually, as a result of the request by enthusiastic on-line members, the forum was extended to the end of January 2000. The whole event was moderated by WACC’s Regional Coordinator for Asia and the Pacific and the whole conference consisted of a total of 178 actions and reactions (The archive of the postings can be found at http://www.churchnet-kr.org/arwacc-forum/archive). It is unknown how many people participated in this forum.

Plans were underway to have a summary of the on-line discussion published in the hardcopy version of the newsletter of the AR-WACC. Such a publication serves two purposes: a. to inform those who do not have access to email facilities, and, b. to come to some kind of closure of the forum.

This conference is not chosen here as an example because of its success. The reason that it is chosen as a case is that the process seems to be typical for on-line conferences. This typicality consists of at least three observations:

1. Its connection to a ‘real life’ event. In many cases, as in this case, an electronic conference is linked to a ‘real life’ event, often also a conference or other kind of meeting. Such a supportive electronic forum allows for preparatory discussions as well as evaluative discussions. Moreover, the forum can be used for sharing practical information on the ‘real life’ event.
2. **The crucial role of the moderator.** The moderator is also the online facilitator and stimulator of the discussions. But s/he is also a distributor of information. To illustrate this in quantitative terms; out of the 178 messages that were submitted to the forum, exactly a 100 were from the moderator himself.

3. **The release of questions structuring and guiding the discussions.** In this case the AR-WACC Executive Committee invited WACC members and non-members to respond to the following questions:

   1. **On Values of Human Dignity:** Many people say that Asian countries have a different standard of human rights compared with the West. The so-called Asian values are predominant in the newly developed countries. Do you think communicators of different faiths and ideologies in Asia (e.g. Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, Marxism and Leninism) share common values on human dignity? If yes, what are these shared values? If not, what different values does each have when it comes to human dignity?

   2. **What constitutes “human dignity” based on your faith and from the context of where you come from?:** Does it matter to your faith and to where you come from? Why or why not?

   3. **On Peace:** Many believe that Peace is one of the common values that people of different faiths share. Nonetheless, religious dogmatism creates barriers between religions. Religious conversions ignite conflicts and cause suspect among peoples. Is there any possibility for peace? What’s the alternative way? How can religions commit themselves to a new world order guided by a new ethic where principles of human dignity and peace form the driving force?

   4. **On Freedom of Expression, Quality of Life, and Market Economy:** Many newly opened countries such as China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Mongolia have shifted from state-controlled/owned economy to market economy, as an effort to improve the quality of life of the people. This trend is obvious after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, when the so-called Eastern Bloc collapsed with the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Do you think: (a) that to improve the quality of life means just the material enrichment and excluding human dignity?; (b) that the new concept guarantees freedom of expression and the right to access to media? If not, what seems to be hindering these countries from moving towards a democratic society in Asia?

   5. **What are the present problems that hamper the equality of resource sharing and freedom of media?:** Are they any different from the problems these countries had under state-controlled economy and Marxist-Leninist ideology?

   6. **On Nationalism:** In many countries, nationalism has become a source of intolerance and exclusive identity. People who do not belong to the majority are excluded, because the majority defines the identity of the nation. In what way can we overcome this perverted nationalism and in turn overcome the barrier for reconciliation?

   7. **On Your Faith and Reflection:** How does your Christian faith (if you are a Christian) affect your approach of promoting Peace and Reconciliation in
Asia? Is there any way to work for peace and reconciliation with other religions in Asia?

8. If you are a media worker, how can you help reconcile conflicts and promote peace?

(Excerpts are taken from the web site: http://www.churchnet-kr.org/arwacc-forum.)

These on-line community dialogues in their various forms of existence are not unproblematic and their success various. Van Dijk (1999) summarized some of the problems for on-line policy oriented discussions in the communication between the government and the citizens. I have slightly modified his inventory to fit our purposes here. Some of the problematic limitations of on-line community dialogues seem to be:

1. The objectives are not always clear. In many on-line discussions, the objectives of the dialogues are not always made explicit. Because of this lack of clear objectives, the expectations and motives to join the dialogue are not always realistic.

2. The range is too limited. This limitation concerns the problem of access to internet and email. In order to have ‘real’ democratic dialogue, access must be available to all community members. In many cases, and especially in the Southern countries this is not guaranteed.

3. The participation is uneven. The actual participation in the on-line dialogues is often even more uneven than it is the case with regard to the issue of access to the internet. If we include socio-democratic factors, level of education, income, gender, ethnicity etc., the image becomes very clear that in many cases the participants in the dialogues already formed a pre-existing community. A community that is male oriented has a high
income, a high level of education and does not include representatives of various ethnic origins and minority groups.

4. *The level of interaction is too low.* Another major problem with on-line dialogues is that the actual interaction is very low. There is not an ‘action-reaction-action-reaction’-type of discussion as is common in face-to-face meetings. Often reactions are limited and short.

5. *The results are for many disappointing.* In many cases, there is no closure, which leaves the participants with an unsatisfied feeling and with reluctance to join another conference.

6. *The absence of experts or responsible persons in the dialogue.* Responsible politicians, administrators, or experts in a certain field are often not participating in the on-line dialogue.

This inventory does not mean that on-line community dialogue has no potential for democratic movements. First, not all the limitations apply to all the different forms of on-line community dialogues. Second, there seems to be a difference in the extent to which certain limitations apply to different regions in the world. Various community based organizations (CBOs) in the United States of America are for instance very active in the use of email lists, whereas this seems—for the time being—only marginal in Europe.

*On-Line Community Networking and Getting the Word Out. But to Whom?*

The above-discussed form of internal communication within communities can be of importance to external communication between communities. Good internal communication can support effective and efficient communication between
representatives/associates of groups/organizations/communities. In a democratic context, this mainly concerns communication between communities and organizations within civil society. The civil society counterbalances the forces of the state and the market in a democratic way. Because of the advantages that internet has over other media forms—especially with regard to time reduction and costs reduction in combination with possibilities of interaction and consultation—the internet and email have become very important integrating parts of civil society.

Two of these organizations that work for community building and networking among NGOs and CSOs in cyberspace are briefly considered in the case entitled *Towards Global and Local Civil Communities?*.

**Case: Towards Global and Local Civil Communities?**

An example of a global civil community is The Association for Progressive Communications (APC). APC is a global network that offers digital support to all kinds of civil society organizations (CSOs). In 1990, APC started out as the first globally interconnected NGO network of groups working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment. Now, APC membership is open to civil society organizations anywhere in the world that share the same mission as APC: to empower and support CSOs through the use of information and communication technologies.

An example of a local civil community network is NGOnet in Belgium, serving the region of Flanders and thus providing its information in the Dutch language. The project started in 1995 and initially the main objective was to offer only technical assistance. By now, this network has also developed into an organization that is devoted to information sharing and education in the field of development cooperation and the internet. NGOnet’s ‘strategical document’ from 1998 states the objective of the organization as follows: “The objective of the NGOnet is to ensure the presence of NGOs on the internet and to introduce and support the use of the
new information technologies for communication and information gathering by NGOs and their partners”.

(Excerpts are taken from the following web sites: http://www.apc.org; http://www.ngonet.be.)

APC and NGOnet are networks that are devoted to applying the internet to improve communication between ‘cyberspace based communities’ that are part of civil society.

Questions that come to mind in this regard are: 1. How is communication between CSOs of relevance to the citizens?, and 2. How can democratic information be found on the internet?. The next part will consider both questions.

The first question I want to address is How is communication between CSOs (community networking) of relevance to the citizens?. Democratic information that is available from the internet seems to be consulted only by those people who already have an interest in civil society issues. Moreover, this concern is often found with professionals and volunteers who, through their work have contact with this kind of information. Such an assumption is not very revolutionary, but an important consequence of this assumption is that a broad perspective of informing and educating the ‘normal’ citizen does not apply. Local NGOs in, for example Mexico, South Africa or Malaysia seldom directly communicate with citizens in the so-called Northern countries. If there is communication at all, it is through sister organizations in the so-called ‘First World’. There seems to be a reversed two-step-flow communication process. Theories of development communication in the ‘60s and ‘70s assumed that communication from the ‘First World’ to the ‘Third World’ occurred in two separate steps. First,
development information was sent to so-called opinion leaders and they disseminated the information among the target audiences. Now, the process seems to be reversed. The internet provides the technology to assure a democratic and indigenous flow of information from Southern NGOs to Northern NGOs, CSOs and news agencies. These organizations are the new opinion leaders and gatekeepers. They can play an essential role in localizing the information and then sharing it with local citizens. How this information flows from the NGO in the North to the citizen in the North is an old problem that already existed before the arrival of the internet. The assumption is that the internet can, at least for the time being, only play a minor role in this communication from a local NGO to a local citizen. The case of the use of the internet by the Zapatistas in Chiapas illustrates this point.

**Case Mexico: Zapatistas Creating a Cyberspace Community**

A by now already classic example of the use of internet to support basic processes of democratization can be found with regard to the war in Chiapas, Mexico. This case situates in the mid-’90s. The Indians of Chiapas wanted to be looked at as full citizens of Mexico. With the uprising of January 1, 1994 the Zapatistas started their struggle for democratic rights, land and jobs and thus against the Mexican federal government and its neo-liberalism (a term often used in Latin America to describe pro-market, pro-business, anti-worker and anti-peasant policies). More than 145 people died in the initial 10 days of fighting, and efforts since to negotiate a lasting peace have failed. The struggle resulted in the invasion of the Mexican army in the Zapatista area in February 1995.

Well known in this struggle is the story that the sub-commandant Marcos of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) sent the *communiqués* from the jungle to the internet. The story goes that he used the electricity from the cigarette lighter in his pick-up to power his laptop. It is doubtful if the story is true. First, it is questionable if the Zapatistas possessed such equipment at the beginnings of their struggle and second, it is doubtful if this was technically possible at all in 1994. More important is the fact that
the EZLN got the *communiqués* and other information out in the open by placing it, or having it placed on the internet. It is realistic to assume that the *communiqués* and other information, after a long and difficult road to Mexico City, were sent from here to ‘email lists’ (e.g. CHIAPAS-L, see [http://burn.ucsd.edu/archives/chiapas-l](http://burn.ucsd.edu/archives/chiapas-l)) and were published in the electronic bulletin MEXPAZ (see e.g. Cleaver, 1998; Pence, 1997; Ponsioen, 1997; [http://www.dds.nl/~noticias/prensa/zapata](http://www.dds.nl/~noticias/prensa/zapata); an annotated list of relevant ‘email lists’, web sites, archives, books and films is available from [http://www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/zapincyber.html](http://www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/zapincyber.html).

Related to this use of the internet is the emergence of LaNeta in Mexico. LaNeta—now operating under the wings of APC—has developed into a national Mexican electronic network of civil society organizations ([http://laneta.apc.org](http://laneta.apc.org)) (see e.g. Marino, 1999). The NGOs in Mexico account for 20% of the internet traffic. The remaining is reserved for business and government (Mont, 1999:96).

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What is important to realize in this example from Mexico is that it are not so much the ‘normal’ citizens who consult the information about the war in Chiapas on the internet. Apart from maybe the direct ethnic concerned citizen, it is first the representatives or associates from NGOs and other organizations in Mexico and around the world, which are interested in the information. An example of such a local organization is the now dissolved Amsterdam based solidarity movement for Mexico (see for more information [http://www.dds.nl/~noticias/prensa/zapata](http://www.dds.nl/~noticias/prensa/zapata) and more specific about the disbandment, see Ten Dam, 1999). Second, it is the news agencies (e.g. IPS) that are interested in the indigenous perspectives on the war. This kind of communication is first of all communication between NGOs (and other organizations) and not communication between NGOs and the citizens. Before the citizen gets involved, the information needs to be ‘localized’. In the case of Chiapas, this localization can for instance mean translating the
**communiqués** and other information into a local language or making it otherwise available and accessible to the local public.

The second question *How can democratic information be found on the internet?* is rather peculiar. What seems to be the case is that consulting democratic information on the internet is in many cases dependent on an announcement of that information elsewhere. The information will only be consulted after it is announced through another medium, like radio, television, newspapers, newsletters, and personal communication. Because of the size of the internet, new information cannot be found, unless it is announced elsewhere. The internet seems not yet a medium that can stand by its own when it comes to finding relevant information. The possibilities of finding the information by using the internet itself are limited. However, there seem to be at least three possibilities: 1. *search engines*, but these cannot always find recent and specific information, 2. *'portal sites’*, but the problem with ‘portal sites’ is that substantial investment is required to keep these sites up-to-date. Such investments are difficult within the civil society, and 3. *announcements via email*, e.g. newsgroups, LISTSERVs, newsletters based on individual subscriptions, or personal communication. An example of this third possibility is given in the case of *Wereldwijd Mail* (World Wide Mail).

**Case Flanders: Wereldwijd Mail (World Wide Mail)**

An example of a ‘localized’ and locally distributed newsletter on ‘current affairs in the global civil society’ is provided by the *Wereldwijd Mediahuis* (World Wide Media House). This NGO is based in the region of Flanders in Belgium and produces the weekly electronic newsletter called *Wereldwijd Mail* (World Wide Mail). The primary language used in the newsletter is Dutch. The
newsletter started at the beginning of 2000. At the end of 2000, the newsletter had 660 subscribers. In April 2001, it was 950. The newsletter especially carries news items that are not covered in the mainstream media. The selection of the news is based on its relevance to everybody who sympathizes with marginalized people in a globalized world. The news items carry links to relevant web sites and background information. Old newsletters are archived and can be retrieved from the web site of Wereldwijd (http://www.wereldwijd.be).

At the end of 2000, Wereldwijd Mail conducted a ‘web site based’-survey among its subscribers to establish a profile of its readers and to cumulate insights in to what extent the objectives of the newsletter were met. Results showed that the readers are predominantly urban based and between 20 and 40 years of age. Two-third of the respondents is male, one-third is female. Almost 90% has a higher education. What seems very important to notice is that more than half of the respondents are professionally or voluntarily active in the fields of development, NGOs and new social movements. Moreover, the electronic newsletter seems to be considered by many readers as an useful addition to the hardcopy magazine (Wereldwijd Magazine) and the journal (Noord-Zuid Cahier) that the Mediahuis publishes. This also illustrates the point that, at least in the case of civil society issues, the internet seems to be a professional medium instead of a citizen’s medium.

(The text is based on internal documents from Wereldwijd Mediahuis.)

‘Geographically Based Communities’

In a way the case of the Zapatista movement can also be used as an example of how the internet can serve a ‘geographically based community’, such as the community of the Indians of Chiapas. The Zapatistas ‘got the word out’ by using the internet. However, in presenting the case of the Zapatistas, the focus was on how a democratic movement was able to build an international or global ‘cyberspace based community’. Here, under this heading of ‘geographically based communities’ the primary focus will be on providing public or collective access to the internet, and thus making information accessible and of use to the community members.
With ‘geographically based communities’ and their use of the internet, the situation seems to be that an existing community uses the internet as a tool for development. The internet and email are considered to be relevant media for development goals. The question that thus becomes of general importance to the case of ‘geographically based communities’ is: *How can relevant information that is available on the internet be made accessible to a community and thus serve the community?* From a technological-economic perspective, this question primarily addresses hardware and infrastructure related problems (access). The question is rather peculiar because studies in ‘community development’ and ‘communication development’ taught us that it is not the information or the hardware that should guide the questions. Instead, ‘participatory problem statements’ and ‘community needs’ should be among the guiding principles in the formulation of questions. The central hypothesis behind the hardware-centered rationale is that increased connectivity and access to ICT-based tools and knowledge can enable communities to solve their own development problems and begin close the information and development gap. But, this hypothesis is often too easily adopted as being true without examining alternatives. This is not to say that the potential is not there, but specific contextual factors complicate every unique local situation. Moreover, from a culturalistic perspective, such a problem statement should also include software and content related problems (relevance).

This kind of use of the internet for community development is not solely, but often associated with (rural and urban) *multipurpose community telecenters* (MCTs). Originally from Scandinavia, these kinds of public community places provide different kinds of telecommunication services (phone, fax, computer, photocopies...)*
and exist in many different forms and in many different parts of the world. As such, they provide an excellent site for the integration of internet and email access. In other cases, these centers are primarily established to provide the access to the internet and email. Pfiester, Roman and Colle (2000) define these centers as “shared public facilities that provide telecommunication services to persons who, for various reasons, do not have them available individually” (Pfiester, Roman & Colle (2000:62). They are distinguished from cyber cafés or telephone call offices by their emphasis on a broader spectrum of information services and by their explicit support to community or individual development. Although these centers seem to be very popular, especially in Africa, still little evaluation studies are available. In the executive summary of Assessing Community Telecentres. Guidelines for Researchers, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) states this problem as follows: “The evaluation studies are urgently needed to provide an assessment of the role and impact of community telecentres, as organizations and donors are implementing these facilities in many parts of Africa without an adequate understanding of how well they respond to the communication and information needs of African communities (particular, the rural communities) or of their impacts on social equity and economic development” (IDRC, 2000).

Case Africa: Rural Multipurpose Community Telecenters (MCTs) Pilot Projects

This pilot project concerns the establishment of five rural multipurpose community telecenters in Africa. The project was implemented in 1998 and developed within the UN System-wide Special Initiative on Africa, entitled Harnessing Information Technology for Development (HITD). The involved agencies are UNESCO, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA),

The Rural Multipurpose Community Telecenters (MCTs) are implemented in five African countries: Benin (Malanville - a town of about 26,000 in the lightly populated far north of the country), Mali (Timbuktu - a town of about 30,000 and regional seat in the desert north), Mozambique (Manhiça and Namaacha - towns of 22,000 and 10,000 close to the capital, Maputo), Tanzania (Sengerema - a town of about 45,000 on Lake Victoria), and Uganda (Nakaseke - a rural village of about 1000, 50 km north of Kampala). The centers are means of providing affordable access to modern information and communication technology tools for development. By enabling users to share the costs of facilities and support, the telecenters offer low-cost means of providing library services through the provision of access to national and worldwide electronic information banks as well as providing information support for literacy campaigns, basic and non-formal education, information on government programs, etc. They also provide facilities for the generation and exchange of community-based information. The rationale of the project fits within the idea of lifelong and life-wide learning of individuals and communities within UNESCO’s Learning without Frontiers (LWF) initiative. Other services and facilities are access to the internet for businesses, NGOs, farmers and the public interested in online banking, market information, weather forecasts and promotion of their products, as well as basic office administration services such as telephone, typing, printing and faxes. Depending on location and demand, other applications such as telemedicine and formal distance education programs could also be added.

**Nakaseke, Uganda**

The MCT pilot project in Uganda is located in the community of Nakaseke, a rural village about 50 km north of Kampala (http://www.nakaseke.or.ug; http://www.nic.ug/nakaseke/). The MCT is build around the new public library sponsored by the Uganda Public Libraries Board (UPLB) and officially opened its doors on March 5, 1999. In an early stage of the project, it was realized that success would come from a proper understanding of the project by the community, and its participation in the design, content and general operations of the MCT. This led for instance to the community making recommendations on the inclusion of local
newspapers, popular local literature and games to cater for leisure
time. Moreover, a local Uganda-based NGO, *Uganda Connectivity*,
was asked to train a cadre of users from the community who could
help to train others. The telecenter started with a library/resource
center complete with custom information materials (a survey was
made during the consultation period on what kind of materials the
community wants). These materials included newspapers and
magazines, a photocopier, computer services and training and
community education/training seminars. Other services that have
been introduced following community requests are free topical and
feature film shows every Friday afternoon, games facilities every
evening, functional adult classes every Friday and radio listening
for particular groups. Three of the main areas in which the MCT
now proves its use are: education (e.g. computer training and the
library service in general), agriculture (extension information and
communication) and health (especially through the pilot
telemedicine application regarding teleconsulting).

The adopters of these MCT’s services include:

- teachers, students and pupils, who want photocopy services and
  a good resource center;
- medical officers who often want a good and appropriate
  reference library;
- business people with the interest of communicating with others
  in the capital city and an interest in innovations to make own
  receipt forms and custom letters;
- community members, elders and opinion leaders interested in
  reading newspapers and following current affairs (until the
  opening of the telecenter there was no source of newspapers in
  the community, and people who wanted to read could not just
  afford them);
- young people who are just interested in learning new skills and
  trying them out; these users provided the first core user group
  in the extension program, and;
- women in development groups who wanted to enhance their
  work by getting information on videos.

The following is an assessment of the impact of the telecenter a
year and a half after its establishment:

- The community has got a modern library/resource center,
  telephone connectivity and a core ICT facility. The school
community (7000 school-going children) as well as community workers and medical officers have benefited a lot from the resource center. One of the volunteer trainers remarked that the MCT "has started enhancing the prospects for development because most of the people have been communicating and receiving information after travelling very long distances and wasting a lot of money [...] but now they can use the telephone in the telecenter and save the money for other development activities”.

- The community (42 villages and 3000 households) is gradually appreciating the importance of information as evidenced by the growing number of people inquiring about information on a variety of issues. Farmers are now requesting market rates and general trends on crops and how they grow. The daily newspapers at the telecenter have also helped to keep the community up-to-date with what is going on in the country.

- Computers are no longer strange and mysterious machines in Nakaseke. Over 60 community members have now been trained in ICT and computer communication services which has led to the growth of a core of ICT skilled people within the local community.

- A number of lessons have been learned and documented for future telecenter development. Management systems for sustainable telecenter operation have been tried and confirmed.

- The MCT has proven that ICTs can be useful for development in rural areas. A good number of development groups have visited the telecenter with a view of establishing a similar one in other areas.

(Excerpts are mainly taken from Rose, 1999. Additional information can be found at Nakkazi, 2001 and the web sites http://www.nakaseke.or.ug and http://www.unesco.org/webworld/telematics/telecentre.htm.)

Despite the popularity of the MCTs, the introduction and use still seem to be in a phase of exploration and there is widespread skepticism about their usefulness and sustainability. A few general lessons can be deduced from different project (e.g. Benjamin & Dahms, 1999; Pfiester, Roman & Colle, 2000; Rose, 1999...). First, management, coordination and organizational structure seem to be crucial. It is important that the local population is involved in all
stages and all sectors of MCT development and that community participation, although very difficult to implement, is pursued and promoted. Ultimately, the goal should be community driven self-management that is rooted in local needs and local cultures. The members of the community must understand the objectives and be convinced of the benefits of an MCT. They must adopt the project as their own, and must acquire the basic skills needed to move ahead. The concept of ‘training the trainers’ seems to be very important in this regard. Moreover, the concept of ‘appropriate technology’ seems to be applicable. Associated with the concept of ‘relevance’, ‘appropriate technology’ comes close to the discussed culturalistic perspective on community development. Community development does not equal technological development and an embedded, overall and comprehensive view on community development is needed to make technology appropriate and to make the content of relevance to the community. Finally, financial and economic sustainability is to be considered in a long-term perspective.

Another way of integrating the internet in the field of ‘community development communication’ is through association with traditional and already established community media. Radio seems to be an obvious choice, because of its, in many cases firm integration in the community. The following case from Sri Lanka is an example of such an ‘integrated community media forms’ perspective.

Case Sri Lanka: Kothmale Internet Community Radio

The Kothmale Internet Community Radio project is a pilot project jointly implemented by UNESCO, the Ministry of Post Telecommunication and the Media of the Government of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka Telecommunication Regulatory Authority and Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation and the University of Colombo. The core
of the project is a community radio station radiating with a one KW transmitter 15 hours on weekdays and 20 hours on weekend days and covering about 60 villages, three towns (Nawalapitiya, Gampola and Hatton) in the south central region of Sri Lanka. The radius is about 20 kilometers and given the hilly terrain, the community radio is sometimes the only source of information for some villages. The radio station began broadcasting in 1989. Programs are produced in a participatory way and cover topics such as health, education, agriculture and various life skills. However, what makes this project unique is that, since 1998, the station uses community radio as an interface between the community and the internet. The community radio provides access to the internet and helps raise awareness about the internet among the community members.

Broken down to its basics, the project has three main objectives concerning the internet: 1. it provides individual access for community members; 2. it uses radio to share information taken from the internet with the community, and 3. it develops and maintains web sites that contain useful information for the rural community and the global community.

**Free Public Access for Community Members**

Free public access to the internet is made available at the radio station. Two other access points are linked to the server at the radio station at the community libraries in the towns of Gampola and Nawalapitiya. The Government, through its Telecommunication Regulatory Commission provides the connectivity. There are 6 computer terminals available at the station. An average of 20 to 25 people visit daily to the radio station to browse the internet while an average of 10 to 15 people visit the Gampola access point. The most frequent users are young people between the age of 15 and 20 years (60%). UNESCO-trained community volunteers help the young people to learn the skills. Most of them search for information required for their school projects. Elderly people who do use the service mainly surf to be informed about current affairs. Those who have overseas relatives also use email to stay in touch.

**Radio Browsing**

In contrast to the direct public access that is mainly used by young people, most elderly people learn about the internet from the daily radio browse program. This one-hour program is broadcasted 5 days a week. The rationale behind this program is that radio broadcasters interpret information from selected internet sites and the listeners can direct queries to the radio station to find specific
information from the internet. One of the advantages is that the community radio provides the requested information in the local languages and thus makes it accessible to those who do not understand English. Relevant information here translates into learning about new tools and techniques for craftsmen, or learning about new or better techniques in the field of agriculture or education. Others find relevance in just being informed about current affairs.

**The Database and Community Web Sites**

The web site component was added to the project to fulfil the following objectives: 1. to develop a database that would obtain useful information for the rural community; 2. to add content in the vernacular in order to overcome the linguistic barrier and provide a point of departure to the speakers of the local languages into the largely English dominated web; 3. provide a portal for the community broadcaster in a manner that would facilitate radio program production, and; 4. provide a means of expression for the community within the cyber community through web publishing. Some people from the community have formed an internet club, learned HTML and web design and now maintain different home pages. These community web pages can be found at [http://www.kothmale.net](http://www.kothmale.net). The database web site can be visited at [http://www.kirana.lk](http://www.kirana.lk).


**Concluding Remarks**

The relation between community development and the internet takes many different forms, but the fundamental distinction that was made in this contribution was one between internet and its relation with ‘cyberspace based communities’ and internet as it can serve ‘geographically based communities’. The so-called *digital divide*—although primarily a result of inequality and not a cause—is real. Its mere existence does pose problems for community development in the sense that there is a growing divide between the so-called ‘information haves’ and ‘information have-nots’. This problem seems to be more severe in the case of ‘geographically
based community development’ than with ‘cyberspace based community development’. As we have seen, especially in on-line community networking, it is the members of established institutions in civil society that constitute the on-line networking. These representatives of NGOs, CSOs or other professional organizations can now more easily form global, regional and local ‘virtual communities’ by using the internet as communication technology. It is here that the internet is fully acknowledged by its advantages over other media, such as the increase in speed, the decrease in costs, the possibility of interactivity and consultation, the convergence of different media forms (text, audio, visuals and even moving pictures), and especially the combination of these possibilities.

It was shown throughout the contribution that internet based on-line community dialogue can play a significant role in increasing the participation in a community and by doing so increase the representation of the community as a whole. The quality of the process of determining different organizational positions and thus cumulating the image/identity of the organization is improved by using the new information and communication technologies. It was also stated that this kind of use of the internet primarily applies to the so-called developed countries and to the community of international organizations (the world of international cooperation). In these spheres, ICTs and the skills to use the ICTs are available in a sufficient way, contrary to the so-called developing countries where this kind of use is marginal. The case that illustrated this kind of on-line internal civil communication was the newsgroup *Soc.Culture.Singapore*. An example of a more deliberate, structured (moderated) and goal-oriented on-line dialogue was provided by the case *AR-WACC On-Line Forum on "Communication*
An inventory was also made of the problems related to these on-line community dialogues.

On-line community networking has been another area of interest. This interest does not concern communication within communities, but between communities. Two organizations that work for this kind of community building and networking among NGOs and CSOs in cyberspace (APC and NGOnet) were briefly considered in the case entitled *Towards Global and Local Civil Communities?*. The complex flow of information from one locality to another was then illustrated in the now already classical case of the Zapatistas movement in Mexico. However, the internet and email do not seem to be appropriate media to inform the broader public on democratic and civil issues. NGOs or CSOs, or indeed any kinds of organization do not yet seem to be able to construct a broader community that includes citizens or geographically based community members. The case of *The Zapatistas Creating a Cyberspace Community* and the case of *Wereldwijd Mail* (World Wide Mail) both showed that the internet seems to be a professional medium instead of a citizen’s medium when it comes to civil society issues. With regard to the use of internet and email, the Zapatistas case might have shown that it is possible—under certain circumstances—to get information from, and about, a civil society movement to the international community of civil society organizations, but the *Wereldwijd Mail* case showed that it is difficult to get the same kind of information from the international professional community to the citizen.

The other form in which the internet was associated with community development was through the question of how the internet can serve ‘geographically based communities’. This question has in many cases led to the implementation of (rural and
urban) multipurpose community telecenters (MCTs). The MCT in Nakaseke in Uganda—one of the five UNESCO Rural Multipurpose Community Telecenters Pilot Projects in Africa—illustrated the rationale of these kinds of centers. The relevance of these MCTs and their appropriateness for community development is not undisputed. This means that we should be very cautious with widespread implementation of these centers and should promote experiments and evaluation research instead. Another way to serve communities with internet and email facilities is through an association with more ‘traditional’ media, like radio. The Kothmale Internet Community Radio project in Sri Lanka demonstrated how an already established local radio station can adopt and integrate internet access and help raise awareness about the internet among the community members through its so-called ‘radio browsing’.

Especially in this regard of ‘internet being a tool for the development of geographically based communities’, the technological-economic perspective seems to be the dominant perspective. If such a one-sided technological and infrastructural centered approach to development is adopted, then the danger exists of ignoring community needs, interests and appropriateness, or, being counterproductive to human socio-cultural development and processes of democratization all together.

References


