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**The Initiation of an E-community: the Glynneath
Community project case study**

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Abstract

This paper analyses the development and emergence of an electronic community (E-community) within Glynneath a South Wales town. Utilising a case study methodology the community project is described including its inception, development, features and benefits that have occurred as a result. The impact upon the Glynneath and key groups therein is discussed in terms of community regeneration and involvement with the website that was the main focus of the project. A literature review on E-communities is presented and contextualises the findings of the study. The paper concludes by identifying the key issues in the development of an e-community namely the emergence of champions and embedding the website within the culture of contributing organisations.

Introduction

A sense of community is an important concept in people's lives. Indeed, society in its fundamental underpinnings, is based on a shared sense of community providing the bond that holds it together. Unsurprisingly, the idea of community has had a physical reality providing its boundaries. The changing technological landscape has, however, challenged the physical binds that have shaped a community's environment. Removing these constraints liberates the potential, and range, of communities. Nevertheless, a community should share certain characteristics, whether it is a physical manifestation or operates on an electronic platform, as "people in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind" (Rheingold, 1994). Inevitably, though, an electronic community is bound to show certain characteristics based on the nature of the technologies being utilised.

E-Community Defined

It is useful to consider what is understood to define an electronic community and the specific nature of virtual communication. Barnatt (1998) provides a broad viewpoint, defining a virtual community as "any group of people who share a common bond, yet who are not dependent on physical interaction and a common geographic location in order to sustain their group affinity" (1998 p161). The interesting focus of this definition is the identification that virtual need not equate to electronic, citing the Roman Empire as an example of a common bond uniting disparate geographical locations. The explicit assumption from this perspective is that geography is an important characteristic in defining and considering a type of community. Indeed, at a micro level an individual's sense of community is inextricably linked to the forms of communication available to them.

Prior to the rise in urban living and 'modern' transport introduced by the industrial revolution, a person's worldview was shaped by the distance they could travel, and community had distinct boundaries, e.g a village or collection of hamlets. The development of postal and subsequently telephone systems played a major role in extending an individual's community. In this continuum the rise of ICT is simply an extension of the tools available adding to the palette of technologies at an individual's disposal. It is this adoption of ICT that is at the heart of electronic or on-line communities as distinct from virtual communities, particularly the role of computer networks (Cothrel & Williams, 1999). Therefore, a simple assumption in distinguishing types of communities is to look at the geographical characteristics. The wider the geographical dispersal the greater the need for effective communication systems.

This inevitably simplifies the picture and ignores the e-communities that adopt ICT to develop and strengthen bonds in an existing, defined geographical area. It

also presumes that the virtual and real world are separate entities never to cross. A further classification that is relevant at this point is the distinction between e-enabled and virtual communities as the geographical question can provide a distinction. "ICT is seen either as an enabler or disabler of traditional forms of community (or) as offering the potential for newer forms of community based on communication networks" (Beynon-Davies, 2002). The case study addresses this form of cross community e-community and raises interesting questions about the rationale behind the need for e-communities and the value that can be derived by members.

The Facets of E-community

It has already been considered that e-communities present a natural extension of traditional interactions utilising the developments in communication technologies. Thus, e-communities, as communities generally, "are social support systems where people engage with each other, relate to the places and spaces around them and create meaning together" (Stevenson, 2002). Central to his notion is the role of ICT as an enabler. Put simply, if electronic methods of interaction such as e-mail, web sites, etc, were not available then the community would cease to operate. In contrast to earlier forms of communication, however, ICT does possess the ability to address a greater audience or more members in a community context (Hardaker & Smith, 2002). It is unsurprising, therefore, that much work has focused on the business and learning communities as opposed to the social impact, particularly in a UK focus.

An important consideration in the understanding of communities is the make up of its members. The notion of a shared interest/activity is a cornerstone of many definitions of community, though not necessarily a uniformed view of the world (Stevenson, 2002). Von Krogh (1998) postulates that the motivation for knowledge exchange within e-communities is not self interest but care for the community. Expertise does not have to be located, tracked and kept up to date; all individuals with an interest are able to participate and learn (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the Internet has spawned such a vast range of communities, based as it is on the concept of networks and the principle of sharing (Armstrong & Hagel, 1995).

Undeniably the community can only be as strong as the members within it as they represent its heart and are the glue that binds everything together. Therefore, the existence of a community, be it electronic or physical, must provide a benefit to its members in order for it to have a reason for existence (Kannan, Chang & Whinston, 1998). Difficulty can arise, though, in determining how this value is measured and the tendency to fall into tangible rewards is an obvious trap as easily measured parameters can be a safe haven. However, as community is about people it is dangerous to assume that all benefits can be easily converted into simple metrics based on finance, units, etc. Yet, business-based communities inevitably have a fiscal benchmarking at some level in order

to determine levels of success against investments made. Interestingly, attempts to move beyond simple quantifiable frameworks look to pick up on the networking aspect of community relationships. With electronic environments, where a web site plays an integral role, the range of interest can include ISPs advertisers, marketers, etc.

These 'external' actors have an obvious interest in the success and longevity of the community. It is noticeable on web-based interest communities that advertising can increase as the level of traffic, with expanding membership, expands. For these organisations the success of the community has clear revenue benefits, likely to mirror the community's prosperity (Armstrong & Hagel, 1995). Therefore, in considering e-communities, a wider range of interest and value needs to be borne in mind. McClure-Wasko & Farej (2000) state that people participate in communities to keep abreast of current ideas and innovations. They identified that the success of the community depends on the knowledge being useful, timely and helpful to the community, a view supported by Jarvenpaa & Staples (2000). A second framework can be applied to the members within the community and seeks to interpret the chain of relationships that exist (Beynon-Davies, 2002). The focus here is clearly on the human dynamic within the environment and the extent to which connections are made, a fundamental aspect of any community.

Differing networks can be mapped based on the interconnections of the membership. Where there are one to one relationships a sense of community may be perceived to be tenuous. Stronger, more vibrant communities demonstrate one to many relationships throughout their structure, promoting a greater connectivity. Arguably tangible value is greater from a community strong in social capital. The existence of external stakeholders alongside community members has been clearly identified. In a Welsh context this necessarily includes the emphasis of a range of agencies seeking to use ICT as a means of developing both the social and business environment of the Principality. A number of initiatives have sought to develop the potential for e-commerce within the business sector, notably amongst SMEs (Beynon-Davies, Muir, Jones & Davies, 2002).

Similar interests aimed at the rural environment are evident on a community level as the ability to generate and disseminate communication through ICT are more clearly being realised. It is evident, therefore, that e-communities have the potential to be as vibrant and valid as more traditional forms of social or business interaction. Indeed, it is arguably a matter of improved and more flexible communication channels. However, success is not a guaranteed outcome. The perceived need for the community and value derived by its members and other stakeholders is an evolutionary process that can recede as well as grow.

The Glynneath Case Study

This case study examines how the introduction of a community based website initiative into a Welsh valley town has realised changes in the way and approach of individuals and groups towards each other and towards the community at large. The case study provides a historical development into the creation of the study, a description of its main features, benefits accrued and future development.

Glynneath – the town

Glynneath is a small Welsh Valleys town, in the heart of South Wales, with just under 5000 inhabitants and bearing the scars of the previous century's industrial decline. A Millennium project, led by the Glynneath Town Council, was commissioned in 2000, and this culminated in a successful bid for a Millennium Commission grant (Millennium Commission, 2000) to create a community based website. The website became active in early 2001, and was promoted locally within the community for an active period of some four months (Glynneath On-line, 2003). During and after the end of this period, a research project was undertaken to measure the initial impact of the site on the community at large.

The Glynneath Community Project -The Initial Study

The initial study was conducted over a period of several months, during which the interest in and use of the site grew considerably. The project organisers recognised the need to bring a range of individuals and organisations together, and therefore the participants and partners in the planning stage of the project were chosen to reflect the wider community of Glynneath as a whole.

Community Participants

The various organisations and groups of people within the community who were involved in the project included those specific to age, gender, culture, sporting activity and also those of the "establishment" in general. One of the leading groups was Teen Talk, an organisation set up in recent years to provide a focus and a range of activities for the young people of the area of teenage years. Other key groups involved were the Glynneath Women's Institute, the Glynneath Male Voice Choir and the Glynneath Training Centre, an adult education centre for the local population. Some twenty or so organisations in total had some involvement in the study.

Website Design

The website was developed professionally, through the commercial arm of the University of Glamorgan. The home page of the site is dedicated to the Glynneath Town Council, which has overall responsibility for the site and its future development. From here, there are links to other associated websites, although the major element of the site is the collection of organisation-based or group pages. Each of these pages is dedicated to a single organisation, club or other body with its roots in the community of Glynneath. Initial training on the use

of the website for individuals and groups in the community was provided at the Glynneath Training Centre. The website is a completely open site, and encourages visits by external web surfers as well as by internal users of the information held. The site has the common facility for visitors to send e-mail messages to a webmaster, and community groups are able to send details of events and other information for posting on the relevant pages.

The Development of the E-community

In order to define and map out the main threads of the community for the purpose of the research project, a study of community websites (world-wide) was firstly undertaken. Twenty-five community websites were contacted to seek out common patterns among the various communities served. The study focused on communication at these localities, through the key issues of “who, what, when and how” information was being communicated. Based on the emerging details from this investigation, a number of key threads were synthesised, which in turn were used as the basis for the Glynneath study. These were:

- the range of community group membership;
- the commitment of individuals to these groups;
- the plurality of group membership (multiple loyalty);
- people’s awareness of other groups in the community;
- their perception and attitude towards the need for communication;
- their (initial) capability of using a website and its associated information tools.

The eventual framework shaped for undertaking the research in Glynneath comprised a number of elements and techniques:

1. Use of focus groups – a number of these were held, which resulted in a better understanding by a core of dedicated volunteers as to what they would be seeking to support by engaging in the work of the project.
2. Webmaster watch – logging the various requests and messages received via the webmaster to gain further insight into how individuals and groups were beginning to use the new framework.
3. Questionnaires and surveys – people from different groups were asked to complete questionnaires, which probed along the main threads identified to learn about their needs and priorities.
4. An e-mail experiment was launched – this was intended to act as a vehicle and a catalyst for the different groups to get to know about each other’s agendas; it also led to a deeper understanding of the community at large, and provided an impetus for an enhanced degree of communication.

Findings of the Study

The emerging issues from the research were enlightening. It was encouraging, though not unexpected, to witness a number of champions becoming quickly enthusiastic about their involvement, and it was these individuals who were initially most active in the use of the website. The number of participants grew significantly over the months, and the broad issues and trends were noted as:

- the commitment of individuals towards various groups in the community was stronger and more extensive than at first perceived;
- people's awareness and perception of each other's activities was limited;
- the general capability of using web technology was restricted to low numbers;
- a number of groups used the website in order to "make a statement" or to "establish their patch";
- the take-up of the community website among groups was incremental;
- a similar slow curve of involvement was witnessed among individual users of the site;
- the literary skills of those communicating ranged from good to very poor;
- the bilingual nature of Glynneath enabled natural usage of two languages;
- positive feedback was received from both participants and non-participating observers
- the development of the website seemed destined to accelerate for some years;
- a second order of communication was triggered;
- the changes were consistent with a rise in social responsibility;
- these developments seemed to give hope to the local workforce and to economic progress in the wider sense.

Key Issues

It was natural to expect a small number of champions to emerge as the early shapers of the new framework. These individuals divided evenly between those who were excited by the advent of the new technology and those who were inspired by the potential to promote the activities of their groups. The latter category are known individually as key members of the community in Glynneath. The knowledge and awareness of the various other groups in the community by some in the former category was surprisingly low.

The prominent groups during the period of the project were Teen Talk (70 members), Glynneath Women's Institute (40 members), Glynneath Male Voice Choir (50 members), Glynneath Historical Society (60 members), Glynneath Rugby Football Club (140 members) and the Glynneath Training Centre (over 200 trainees). Other groups later became involved and made use of the site. Teen Talk's enthusiasm to participate in the project could be looked at not only from the perspective of young people's ready acceptance of technology, but from the point of view that this organisation wanted to make a statement to the town that it was "in business" and, more significantly, that here was a worthy activity for the youngsters to be engaged in. This statement reflects the fact that Glynneath had suffered considerably over the years from youth annoyance issues and vandalism. The Glynneath Historical Society was an example of a group that actively sought to recruit more interest and more members from the local community. Being a group, largely, of people at or around retirement age, it was indicative that they were anxious to use such a new medium to seek out a (perceived) younger element to add to their ranks. As anticipated, some groups and individuals became interested and involved before others. This reflects the tendency gleaned from the community website study that full maturity of a site in

terms of it becoming an embedded information and communication framework could take as long as four to five years.

Speed of Utilisation & Inhibitors to Development

There seemed to be different explanations and reasons for each particular group's speed, or otherwise, to embrace the project. With some organisations, it was clearly a matter of individuals lacking the skills or confidence to join what was perceived as being a technological project. With other groups, there were different inhibitors. The two local schools, for example, whilst extremely enthusiastic over the prospect of contributing to the project, did not participate until much later owing to heavy curriculum pressures. In a small number of cases, there was a tendency for an organisation to wish to remain relatively closed, not actively seeking to share its activities or even its existence at a high profile. The same pattern was found to be true for individuals. For example, young people of Higher Education age were in contact with the Webmaster in some numbers, whilst older, possibly working, individuals were less inclined to do so. One interesting contact was made by a former member of the Glynneath Silver Band, who was indignant at the fact that there was no page entry on the website for this particular organisation. However, for the reasons suggested above, canvassing the band for its participation in the project had not been successful.

Members Feedback

Feedback received from individuals through questionnaire returns and through their input at various meetings or focus groups was extremely positive. It was clear that they had gained further affinity, in respect of the community threads, as a result of participating in the project. Other commentators who were not actively participating in the project were also complimentary, such as the regular columnists for the two weekly papers in the area. One surprising element of the research was the range of literary abilities of the communicators. Messages submitted were of varying standards, from the well written to the very poor. Whether because of the modern technological setting of the website framework, there has nevertheless been a tacit acceptance of occasionally low quality (literary) content. It is encouraging that use of computer technology can provide an unconventional route into more orthodox literary skills, as noted by Levine (1986) as far back as the mid 1980s. Glynneath is a community where both Welsh and English are spoken. About 30% of the population can communicate via both languages, although a considerable proportion of these individuals may lack the confidence to write in Welsh. A refreshing aspect of running the website project was that of seeing a pattern of natural usage of language, with both languages becoming utilised within the appropriate circumstances and with the appropriate degree of proportionality.

Community growth

Observing the communication over a period of months, it became clear that the website itself had given rise to a new dimension of community information and

dissemination. Communication had become both more frequent and wider between groups, whilst individuals had an additional means of either seeking or contributing information. This is consistent with the concept of an E-nabled community (Beynon-Davies, 2002). On the level of the whole community, the Glynneath website had an increasing profile of hits from outside of the town. One interesting aspect of the project was the way in which the town's twinning link with France had been promoted. It became apparent that a second order of communication and networking was occurring as a result of the embedding of this website. This was most encouraging from the Town Council's point of view, as it hinted at an improvement in the social responsibility of the community at large, implemented through improved social networks and resulting in an enhanced level of social capital. Increasingly, the website was helping to embrace more and more of the community's main stakeholders, giving rise to hope for the future, both from a social and from an economical standpoint. Therefore, a framework based on what were initially technological structures, evolved to deliver a mechanism for "accelerating voices" within the community of Glynneath (Morgan, 2002). The framework that had been established for the project also provided a vehicle that could enable a more formal input from the town's commercial sector, giving the young and unemployed members of the community an additional opportunity of keeping abreast with, or even communicating with, the business sector. It is hoped that access to the activities of the website by all of the citizens of Glynneath (via the Town Library or the Glynneath Training Centre) will continue to contribute towards raising the levels of modern basic skills among the town's potential workforce. Research will continue, in an attempt to trace exemplars of such community-to-business communication in future.

Future Development Strategy

Since the original phase of research, and following the initial period of intense promotion of the new website, usage of the site waned as might be anticipated. The next challenge for the community of Glynneath was to rekindle the enthusiasm and the initiative found within the project and to map out some further parameters with which to study the potential impact of this vehicle on the growth of social capital. This activity has commenced, and is at the point of finalising the shape of the next phase of research. A targeted questionnaire was designed and distributed to a small number of key website users. This asked participants to give their opinions on the good and, conversely, the poor aspects of the current website, and to suggest any improvements. Users were also asked their views on how well the website projected the true community of Glynneath, and how the use of this site could transform or improve the community spirit or social capital of the town. From the collection of replies received, a specification for the next phase of study has been drafted. A second strand of activity aimed at generating new impetus for the use of the website during the second phase of development has also begun. This entails a number of presentations being made to local organisations that have yet to engage with the website to any significant degree. The synthesis of ideas gained from the questionnaires provides little by way of

elements that could not be anticipated from the results of the initial phase of research. However, the feedback from users does provide confirmation that investigation is required along similar lines to that of the original work, all be it in a way that takes the study forward to a new level. Four key areas have been identified for consideration, described as new project objectives, as follows.

- the introduction of an (edited) community news/bulletin feature;
- encouragement for more regular contributions and page updates;
- particular scrutiny of any activities linked to commerce or employment;
- observation of bilingual patterns of usage of the website.

In addition to these objectives, attention will also be given to the community threads investigated during the original study. A particular interest has arisen in relation to a major local planning issue, which is likely to generate a lively discussion across the entire community. This relates to the possibility of a large secure detention centre for young offenders being established on the edge of the town. The issue provides a fascinating strand of communication that seems set to influence the use of the website and hence the study over the coming months.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the success of the community project is due not only to the drive and initiative of its champions, but also the actualisation of the project as a focus for community regeneration. The community success can be attributed to members participating to encourage community development rather than promoting self-interest. To ensure longevity of the project it is essential that the project's key contributing organisations embed the website into their operating culture. It is predicted that the results of the further study in Glynneath will confirm and add to the set of original results produced in 2001 following the introduction of the website. These should be enhanced in their characteristics given the further degree of on-line activity. The new strand of communication within the community, that of a "second order" triggered by the website, will become more and more embedded. Members of the community will become more aware of their own and others' needs, both socially and socio-economically. There is a slow transformation in the skills and mindset of the community and its internal groups. This will include the transformation of fear into confidence with respect to use of technology and the ability for a bilingual society to express itself through its two tongues. The existence of the website will continue to act as a catalyst for more community-based activities, and as a generator of further social networks and social capital. It is forecast that within four years the transformation will be significant.

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