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Community networks and cultural intermediaries: the politics of community net development in Greater Manchester

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Local governmental multimedia agencies and partnerships in community net development

This article examines the development of civic and community networks in the Greater Manchester area. Civic and community networks (sometimes called PENs or public electronic networks) supply information about local community groups, city council community provision of goods and social services, and information about local government itself. Civic nets can be contrasted to information-providing community nets in that they are dedicated to governmental information, and have recently offered new avenues for political communication and potentially direct democratic forms of local governance. However, British civic nets are at present often little more than town hall web pages, although sites vary in range of information, links to other organizations, and levels of feedback and interactivity (i.e. email, computer conferencing).[1] The so-called 'digital cities' are similar projects, but not necessarily always initiated by local authorities, and they can often be highly commercialized. Digital city networks, however, tend to be more interactive, have higher percentages of graphics to text and simulate a virtual reality (VR) form of participative environment.

Community nets, in contrast, contain predominantly community information and links to community organization web pages and bulletin boards. Manchester Community Information Network (MCIN), for example, is actually owned by the city council but its content is overwhelmingly drawn from its principal community information 'feeder' organizations like Mind

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and local authority health trusts, although it has hyperlinks to myriad other community organizations in the Greater Manchester area.

The local state has been a key focus in the development of local community networks. The European Union's (EU's) Telecities Partnership and the Telematics Application Programmes (TAP) are just two examples of the whole series of publicly funded telematics initiatives which have created a sustained and influential role for local government in this field.[2] Each of these EU initiatives has a range of support actions which mix and merge community net, civic net and small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) support. Thus the Telematics Application Programme, for example, has Assent (Assessment of Telematics Programme) Concord 1 (Concertation and Co-ordination), Ethos (European Telematics Horizontal Observatory Service) and Epitelio (Excluded People's Integration by the use of Telematic Innovative Opportunities). The EU Telework Forum, another enormous area of activity, has transnational projects such as Teleurba (Telework and Urban and Interurban Traffic Congestion), Tesse (Telework Experiments of Services for Small Business), Twin (Teleworking for the Impaired Networked Centres Evaluation) among many others.[3]

As a result of these initiatives the Greater Manchester area has seen the establishment of seven technology management centres (TMCs) in six metropolitan and city councils (Blackburn, Bolton, Manchester, Oldham, Preston and West Lancashire). These provide web technology for small and medium-sized enterprises and community groups' use of information and computer technology (ICT). Manchester's own TMC is involved in providing a number of community-focused projects such as telematics training and services for SMEs. The centre has been specializing in creating applications for information technology (IT) in education in a 'Cyberschools' project, as well as multimedia and teleworking among other projects.

A key consequence of this funding environment is that Manchester boasts several flourishing partnerships between private businesses, academia and public ICT agencies, including the Multimedia and Network Centre, Manchester Telematics and Teleworking Partnership, and Manchester Technology Management Centre. The key spatial coordination point in this process, linking academia, cultural intermediaries and the technological elite, is the city's Science Park. Located near to Manchester University, the Science Park houses the TMC and Manchester Teleworking and Telematics Partnership, and a number of Internet service provider (ISP) companies. Manchester Metropolitan University, probably one of the key academic institutions in terms of multimedia, is linked to these organizations by the fast cutting-edge Greater Manchester Information Network Group (GMING) local area digital fibre optic cable network (Strom and Neisser, 1998). Manchester Metropolitan University's EU-funded 'state-of-the-art' Geoffrey Manton Building is also the location of Manchester

Multimedia and Network Centre, the main local authority and EU supported multimedia development agency in the city.

A number of infrastructural developments made by Manchester City Council in the early 1990s gave the city a head start in establishing civic and community networks and dedicated IT institutions (Graham, 1992). The city council was one of the first UK local authorities to establish a city-wide HOST computer which acts as the server for a local network linking a range of community and non-profit organizations. At the same time, it initiated its main public access computer terminals (principally in public libraries) linked to the HOST, which were dedicated to the Manchester Community Information Network. MCIN has now developed, with the aid of EU 'TARDIS' funding, to provide hi-tech community information kiosks at half a dozen sites around the city.[4] Developed in 1997 in partnership with SEMA Ltd, VirginNet, Poptel (an ISP based at the Science Park) and NEC Ltd, these are combined computers and printers in a robust metal housing with a user-friendly 'touch-screen' keyboard and allow public access and email to editorially designated organizations.[5]

Manchester's most significant community-based CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) development has been its dedicated community electronic village halls (EVH). Fostered by the early 1990s rounds of the European Community (EC) Article 3 funding and the Urban Programme, four EVHs were set up in the early 1990s, a pioneering development that established community access to IT technology. The EVHs provide banks of computers and other hardware, and are staffed to deliver support, training and access courses.

As a result of the ever-increasing number of publicly funded projects, agencies and partnerships within the corporate sector, local authorities are empowered to direct telematics development in the field of community and civic networks. However, this power is highly mediated by other political factors outside the locality. Not least of these is the overall entrepreneurial and private sector orientation of the EU's funding policies which (following the Bangemann report on ICT development) tend to orient telematics development to the corporate sector.[6]

The influence of local political culture and class on community net development

All of this activity confirms Graham's (1992: 771, 1994; Graham and Marvin, 1996) argument that the local state has an important impact on the development of the net. Indeed, Hepworth (1991) has argued that although local authorities may have something of a 'Cinderella' status in relation to the corporate sector, their ICT policy choices are one of the main ways of mediating global forms of ICT power. Guthrie and Dutton (1992) note that

understanding a local political milieu is important for interpreting how telematics development will result not just from the technological choices made, but in alliance with a number of local social and political forces. For example, the prevailing political culture of a city will have repercussions for the options taken in civic net development, influencing the direction of grant monies and the choice of which technological options available for high or low levels of interactivity will be made available to civic and community networks. The writers note that choices have to be made in relation to 'system capacity', 'architecture of communication channels', 'levels of accessibility' to public terminals, the nature of the content and the relative balance of public or private commercial sources, 'mode of editorial control', public or private ownership and financing (Guthrie and Dutton, 1992: 580–1).

With regard to changes in the class structure that may be arising as a result of changes in the productive bases of modern societies, Shields has noted the rise of two 'virtualised production and consumption' classes:

> [T]he conventional class distinctions based most notably on relationships to the mode of production are displaced into a dual structure of virtualised production *and* consumption classes articulated through the medium of cyberspace and VR even while disrupted through the carnivalesque and ecstatic *excess* of the vital activities of those same users. (1996: 9)

The technoclass as a whole sets many of the terms for technological solutions, such as network technology (broadband fibre optic cable, public access kiosks). However, 'cultural intermediaries' are also an important fraction in the technoclass and it is they who have a greater role in applications of ICT (for example, creating community institutions' web sites). Due to their strong presence in public sector telematics agencies, cultural intermediaries tend to work in multimedia development, rather than infrastructure. This 'second-degree' source of power (in relation to the technoclass), however, is not negligible.

Sociological studies of postmodernism have traced out the influence of cultural intermediaries as the consumer group that has a homologous relationship to postmodern forms of consumption (Featherstone, 1991; Lash and Urry, 1987). Other studies have examined this group's situation in the cultural industries as a key locus of their contemporary 'symbolic power' and influence (Savage et al., 1992). There has been almost total neglect of this group as cultural specialists, however, in studies of urban telematics development. Except for sporadic interventions from those advocating class approaches in this field (e.g. Hakken et al., 1996; Hardt, 1996; Lockard, 1997), the role of cultural intermediaries in ICT has been largely overlooked.

When sociological studies of the net touch on the issue of social class, there tends to be confusion over the relative designation of cultural

intermediaries, the 'technoclass' and 'new class'. Calabrese and Borchert (1996), for example, argue that there are two contradictory (but compatible) models of network activity emerging on the superhighway – a corporate model, which has high levels of interactivity and feedback at elite level, and a consumer model for the majority of the population. The writers argue that:

> For the New Class electronic democracy will facilitate and confirm its members' political franchise and their automatic access to the closest contemporary approximation of the early bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas and others.[. . .] By contrast with patterns in the civic model, the information superhighway will be biased almost exclusively on a consumer model for lower strata.[. . .] Wage earners, the precariously employed and the unemployed will interact infrequently on a horizontal dimension, except primarily in commercial modes which are institutionally and hierarchically structured and controlled for commercial purposes such as games and shopping [. . .] (Calabrese and Borchert, 1996: 252–3)

The writers argue that the potential of the net to renew civic and democratic participation is restricted to the 'new class'. However, this conception of the nature of class differences in ICT-facilitated access to the public sphere is somewhat sweeping, and a simple model of participatory politics and class in terms of ownership of state-of-the-art ICT hardware or the ability to access closed or subscription networks misses other major status differences, not least divisions within the new middle class.

Both cultural intermediaries and Calabrese and Borchert's New Class share a similar location in the quaternary occupational sector:

> Those supplying services that require research, analysis, judgement, in brief brainwork and responsibility and what might be called the quaternary forms of economic activity: the managerial and artistic functions, government, education, research and the brokerage of all kinds of goods, securities and services. (Kellerman, 1993: 10)

However, cultural intermediaries are the *cultural* grouping within this sector, much less involved in command and control functions. They are also distinct in this way from the ICT R&D (research and development) elite and lower echelon 'techies', located in the premium spaces of virtual production – science parks or 'teleports':

> [T]here is indeed a strong cultural specificity in the values and lifestyle of executives, engineers, technicians, and skilled workers that forms the human basis of this leading milieu of innovation. (Castells and Hall, 1994: 21)

Castells and Hall note here the highly educated ICT development workers in hi-tech cutting-edge R&D arms of global communications companies. This group is made up of senior and middle-ranking professional personnel

who translate problems of information communication and management into technological solutions. Cultural intermediaries are obviously much further down the social hierarchy, outside corporate sources of economic, scientific and technological capital. Instead, cultural intermediaries are found among the peripheral but more numerous personnel of corporate ICT – working as graphic designers, multimedia consultants and similar functionaries in software and graphic design companies, as well as in non-profit local governmental community network development agencies.

Cultural intermediaries may share the generally privileged position of most of the new middle class in their relationship to ICTs, but they are a distinct fraction and within it. Massey et al. (1992) argue that the social construction of the division of labour is as important as its demarcation on the basis of 'objective' criteria (such as income and credentialization), and that fractions within broad class groupings should be discerned in a relational way (Massey and Wield, 1992; Massey et al., 1992: 128). We can thus contrast cultural intermediaries to the technoclass because they are a much more numerous and socially subordinate fraction of the new middle class. As Bourdieu describes it in the French case, cultural intermediaries are the dominated fraction within the overall socially dominant new middle class. Their lifestyle is marked by a mixture of popular consumer culture and high cultural aesthetics, and this heterogeneity in consumption habits distinguishes them from other groupings in the new middle class as a whole. Cultural intermediaries, in Bourdieu's words (1992: 365), have moved from a 'duty to [a] fun ethic', a characteristic which distinguishes it from the technoclass. Castells and Hall's study of techno-poles relates the technoclass to Gouldner's (1979) New Class, and sees it as embodying a contemporary equivalent of the 'Protestant work ethic': entrepreneurialism, aggressive competition, individualism and corporate loyalty. Although Castells and Hall see this group indulging in 'bouts' of cultural consumption, this is always coupled with a thoroughgoing commitment to their work as a goal in itself. So culture is used more as an expression of 'status-oriented conspicuous behaviour, as a tension release mechanism' (Castells and Hall, 1994: 24), rather than as a source of expertise and guarantor of social position.

Cultural intermediaries may share some of the values of the technological elite but they are much more involved in virtual forms of cultural production such as multimedia. However, they also depend on accessing large measures of bureaucratic (i.e. state-funded rather than market) capital, since the educational capital underpinning their market position (media, arts, humanities and social science certification), is weaker than that of the New Class and the R&D elite. But the acquisition by cultural intermediaries of high levels of cultural capital in the form of media, arts, design and humanities finds support in (principally) non-profit multimedia partnership agencies and governmental institutions.

Cultural intermediaries in the Manchester network: Manchester Multimedia Centre

This section develops the above points in an analysis of interviewees' comments on key ICT institutions around Manchester. Of prime importance here is the Manchester Multimedia Centre (MMC). This is involved in fostering 'creative' partnerships with SMEs in software development. The MMC, however, is qualitatively different from other publicly resourced agencies, for example Manchester Technology Management Centre (a partnership between Manchester City Council, the North West regeneration agency Enterprise plc and ICL computers). Whereas the latter agencies are concerned primarily with business ICT uptake and SMEs, the Manchester Multimedia Centre specializes in software and web page development for community telematics. The following quote from an interview notes the pervasive influence of this agency:

> The MultiMedia Centre is quite instrumental really in a lot of work that we are doing because of their support and work they are doing with SMEs – web pages and things like that. So we find that in a lot of things we are doing they have a large role to play, technical support, web design really. So the main partner has been the Museum of Science and Industry but the MMC has been the technical advisor in terms of what they are doing with SMEs. So one of the things they are doing for the Science Museum, they have been developing a database in which they have been digitalizing articles from their big collection on textiles. So the MMC has been involved in advising on the hardware for doing that and working with the software supplier and the front end of that, the user interface bit. So there is that bit of collaboration that goes on so they kind of 'pop up' all over the place. (Technology Project Manager)

Manchester Multimedia and Network Centre also exemplifies the particularly *cultural* intermediary habitus common in this type of organization. For example, its director is a graduate in design who 'by the mid 80s, after spending time in Europe and America playing as a session guitarist [. . .] returned to the world of design, shifting to the computer gaming industry' (Multimedia and Network Centre, 1998). Later he went on to gain a BA in design and then went into information technology consultation for public organizations like HMSO, the BBC and the British Council. This is a good example of a typical cultural intermediary curriculum vitae and its 'transposability' (in the sense of Bourdieu's concept of the deployability of the habitus) into the field of publicly funded creative software and multimedia development.

Manchester Multimedia Centre's economic role, alongside its community telematics work, is to support multimedia SMEs in the city, and much of the stress here is on businesses in the cultural industries sector. The centre has been instrumental in supporting Manchester's events listing web site 'Madforit'. This very much 'Manc'-styled[7] site, is oriented to youth culture

and tourism, and describes itself as conveying 'the essence of the city'. Similar cultural intermediary influences have also come from the centre's involvement in Manchester City Council's initiatives in the EU Infocities project. Manchester City Council, highly conscious of the growth potential of its cultural industries, is specializing in cultural forms of IT development and, as a consequence of this, is bolstering the influence of cultural intermediaries in the city's key IT development agencies. Cultural industry ICT spin-offs from Infocities have involved the centre in collaborations with municipal cultural institutions like Manchester Science and Technology Museum (e.g. the creation of a 'virtual museum' database of the collection).

Cultural intermediaries in Manchester's growth coalition

Referring back to Guthrie and Dutton's points about the impact of prevailing political milieu in cities on telematics development, the influence of Manchester's renowned 'urban growth coalition' should be noted. Growth coalitions are elite networks of landowners, builders, insurers, venture bankers and property developers/architects. These groups will cooperate (to varying degrees depending on the type of coalition – see Logan and Molotch, 1987) with the local state to boost local property values either by various development schemes, or by stimulating inward investment. As the work of Peck (1995) and Harding (1996) has pointed out, Manchester's growth coalition has been facilitated by the strong lead from the city council in promoting entrepreneurial approaches to city redevelopment. Peck argues that Manchester's coalition tends to be somewhat inconsistent and shifts about between 'half-baked' projects, but it has nevertheless been an important force in the city's effort to modernize itself. Despite the fact that public funding has been the key to the success of most of the major developments in the city, planning discourses organized around ideas of entrepreneurialism and privatization, along with a sympathetic local media, has the effect of enhancing property developers' profiles in the local public sphere:

> The political capacity of business elites derives in part from the attribution by the state of 'public status', having less to do with the 'energy and cunning' of its individual members and more to do with effective '*sponsorship*' by the state. This process of sponsorship, broadly defined, may take either a concrete institutional form (as decision-making powers or resources are devolved by the state), or a more nebulous ideological form (as the state confers upon business elites 'voice' in discourses of economic development and urban regeneration). (Peck, 1995: 26)

This power devolved from *symbolic* (i.e. 'voice') power in the local state is an important factor in Manchester's urban telematics development.

Guthrie and Dutton (1992) note that a neo-liberal governance culture in Pasadena served to restrict the development of an interactive and open form of civic network. And, as Malina and Jankowski's study of Craigmillar Community Information Service in Edinburgh (1998) argues, an urban entrepreneurial environment in telematics development can mean that local authorities fail to empower local communities in what at first sight seem to be quality forms of community telematics provision (Craigmillar Community Information Service [www.ccis.org.uk] includes free Internet email, free Internet access, online help with web page authoring):

> While a blend of communitarian and capitalistic values revolves around social and economic directives and mechanisms for rejuvenation, there also remains a lack of direct communication between the marginalized and other members of the community. Local people, i.e. the fourth sector, living in the 'real' (residential) community, appear to be included in the 'virtual' partnership under the broad heading 'community', but are not in a position to directly contribute to or challenge the directives and principles. (Malina and Jankowski, 1998: 46–7)

In Manchester the intersection of partnership ideology and private business elite-led property development serves locally to ground the prevailing 'entrepreneurial' market-led ICT growth consensus at the European level.

> I think if you compare [the public funding policy in Manchester] with Liverpool it's a lot more positive and there has been a sense in Manchester over the last ten years that it's the centre of development. In Liverpool for example the local council voted against the SRB [Single Regeneration] bid in the city centre and the reason they did that was that there was more poverty on the outskirts than the centre and therefore the money should be going to the outskirts. Forgetting about the arguments, that just wouldn't happen in Manchester. You know like the Concert Hall they spent £42 million even with all the deprivation in Wythenshawe or Moston or whatever. (Community ICT activist)

The partnership entrepreneurial growth consensus, property-developer power and cultural intermediary multimedia agencies can thus interact to produce a powerful mix of ICT, culture and property power which may override specific community net development.

This can be illustrated by the example of the 'McEnroe Group', which was formed by leading cultural intermediaries in Manchester's property development and media industries. In contradistinction to property *owners* or 'rentiers' (the usual catalyst group according to Logan and Molotch, 1987), the McEnroe Group's members are generally liberally educated, creative media, arts and entertainments people. As an 'urbane intelligentsia' representative of the cultural intermediary fraction, this group ranges from directors of some of the key music production companies in the city, to night-club owners, media production companies and 'designer-led' property redevelopers.

After voicing criticism of Marketing Manchester (the city's inward investment agency and promoters of tourist and leisure web sites like Madforit) and its 'Manchester – We're Up and Going!' advertisements for the city, the 'McEnroe Group' (referring to the tennis player John McEnroe's characteristic complaint 'You must be joking') developed an alternative campaign. By drawing on the expertise of the Multimedia Centre, applying their own cultural and design acumen and thus effectively speaking the 'same language' as the Multimedia Centre, they were able to create, in just three days, a highly effective alternative campaign:

> It had been decided that, during these three days, two individuals working with the Multimedia Centre [. . .] would take care of the digital side of things, which included the creation of a CD ROM featuring an experimental two-minute video incorporating music produced and remixed by local DJs, and showing each of the designed billboards situated around the city using graphic manipulation to superimpose them on photographed sites.[. . .] [W]ithout the help and assistance of the Multimedia Centre, particularly access to their state-of-the-art equipment, the process of making the ideas into realities would simply not have been possible. (Multimedia and Network Centre, 1998: 13)

This dynamic and 'free-floating' nature of the symbolic power of cultural intermediaries is perhaps secondary to the structural power of ICT corporations, or the property owners and landlord fraction in Manchester's growth coalition. Nevertheless, this ability to project a vision and identity for the city is an example of the symbolic power of cultural intermediaries in telematics development agencies.

The impact of commodification: virtual Manchester

Virtual city sites can be distinguished as being of the 'grounded' and 'non-grounded' types (Aurigi and Graham, 1998: 66). Some sites are purely commercial ventures, like virtual shopping malls with just a few civic links thrown in. Other sites are purely imaginary civic spaces, Internet equivalents of 'Sim City', which are built up, legislated and otherwise 'run' in a virtual environment. However, grounded virtual city sites claim to 'represent' a real spatially located city, either with the aim of enhancing its civic and community communications networks, building up social network links between interest groups and often melding these principles with leisure and commercial sponsorship.

The Virtual Manchester network, which MCIN and the City Council web pages are linked to, is 'grounded' but this is problematized by the commercial nature of the site:

> Another ERDF [European Regional Development Fund] project via Marketing Manchester [inward investment agency] is a tourism web site which is a very

> successful web site, and linked to the *Evening News* website. But the idea of that in the same way that the Madforit was done is very much appealing to a youth audience and it's been very successful. So the entertainments bit has been linked to the *Manchester Evening News* web site – so there has been quite a lot of collaboration [with the leisure and entertainment sector] going on. (ICT officer, Manchester City Council)

It is possible to find at the interstices between the many leisure-oriented sites that make up this Manchester network some instances of a more vibrant community net culture and participatory communications milieu. There are links to community pages such as Chorlton Web, which includes pages on local accommodation, email bulletin boards and notifications of local council meetings. Virtual Manchester also includes links to civic sites, Manchester City Council web pages, and the pages of the local Civic Society and Labour Telematics Centre.

However, the overall character of Virtual Manchester is leisure and commercially focused entertainment. For example, the site was developed, designed and maintained by XTML Creative, a private ISP with links to Global One (an international telecommunications company). This may be a minor point but the commercialized nature of Virtual Manchester is the cumulative effect of a number of minor features. For example, its 'Weather outlook' is provided by Granada TV (originally an independent regional television station, Granada is now an international media corporation) and it has a constantly flashing logo of its sponsor (Unet Ltd). Sponsorship and logos crop up at various other points, like its 'Cream of Manchester' top ten entertainments listings (sponsored by Boddingtons' brewery). A consumer model of net access, pointed to in the introduction to this article, is found in the high levels of trivia interactivity in the site's 'Urban Myths and Legends' pages, or 'Interactive Manchester', 'chat' and 'swapshops'. So, although community sites are readily accessible, they are subordinated to the overall consumerist and leisure rhetoric of these pages. As a result, Virtual Manchester is not really aimed at being a forum for serious local and community politics, because the overall impression is 'chat', nostalgia, dull bulletin board listings, and commercial site prompts and links.

In this 'fun virtual environment' many of the pressing issues for community politics and the quality of urban life are stifled. The high news value of crime, for example, is curiously absent, probably because much of the content of these pages is oriented not to local users but to 'surfers', browsers and potential tourists. It is arguable that this role of Virtual Manchester requires it to keep up a commercially profitable rebellious 'Madforit' image, but ultimately politically neutralized public face.

Despite the post-sociological hype (e.g. Poster, 1997: 211; Shields, 1996) about carnivalesque language being a key linguistic development of CMC, it is surprising how uniform and conventional web page authoring styles are. This reflects critically on the supposedly avant-gardist, play and

carnivalesque nature of communication on the Internet. If one compares the web page design principles of most of the proto-civic sites linked to Virtual Manchester there is a consistent correspondence in style between community-civic, leisure-corporate and consumerist pages. In part, of course, this comparability arises due to the constraints of HTML, the hypertext mark-up language and other programming scripting applications like Java Script. Although there are a number of variants in coding syntaxes, such as HTML, XML, SGML (see www.internet.com) the use of text blocks, conventional newspaper-type columns, photographs, conservative fonts, underlining and tedious lists, all work to unite these sites stylistically. Content is also very similar, as are the titles: 'Get Sorted', 'Your People', '24 Hour City', 'Chat', 'the Greatest', 'For Sale', 'Manchester Bands' or 'Fan's Team'. All these characteristics are pedestrian and actually reminiscent of the traditional format and concerns of the small ads columns appearing in the advertising section of the conventional local press.

But HTML is not responsible for the conventionality of communication forms on many web pages and sites. This derives instead from the 'middlebrow' nature of cultural intermediaries' multimedia production, the public sphere *moyen-political* virtual counterpart to the '*moyen*-cultural' intermediaries in Bourdieu's analysis of the French class system (Bourdieu, 1992). Leisure sites such as 'Madforit', and 'Get Sorted' are hardly hybrid wonders or 'revolting', but rather a *moyen*-culture marked by hackneyed linguistic and visual forms embedded in the generally flattening effect of HTML and web page authoring.

Poverty of information in community nets

So there is a need to create alternative models for community and civic web pages that go beyond such hackneyed genres of commercialized forms of web page authoring. Similarly, the commercially driven preference for directionless hypertext links has to be guarded against in programming community and civic net interfaces if they are to foster the identity of a community or polity. The issue of the quality of the virtual local public sphere depends on whether community networks will be adequately resourced with *relevant* civic information and intelligently interactive and engaging pathways.

Manchester Multimedia Network Centre has been used as an example of a public agency where 'cultural intermediaries' have an important influence on community and civic net development. The centre, along with other agencies like Manchester Telematics and Teleworking Partnership and Manchester TEC (Training and Enterprise Council) is also charged with producing IT training and access courses for socially excluded groups in

the city and reversing their 'technophobia'. However, the creativity and enthusiasm for virtual cultural production apparent in the Centres' support for the McEnroe Group campaign is missing in its community telematics training support projects, which are marked by a pedagogically dull approach. The feeling on the part of community networkers is that this attitude restricts community telematics and the delivery of more relevant, quality and *useable* community information:

> I think that the biggest problem that has existed, also with things like the MTTP [Manchester Technology Training Programme], is that they have tended to take these things and 'demonstrate' them, or they 'demonstrate' ISDN or they 'demonstrated' things for community groups – but the world does not work like that. There is no point, if someone says they are doing a demonstration of ISDN for SMEs if an SME is someone who doesn't have that many people to send on courses, or it's free when they don't know what the benefits are. It doesn't generate people to come through. (Manchester Community Network activist)

Other criticisms of this technophile and pedagogic attitude to communities in multimedia training and access can be found in the Electronic Village Halls. One EVH worker describes the problem of being constrained by its subcontract training workload for the local TEC, yet needing this regular income in order to enable it to 'do other things':

> We got sick of the disruption so we became a training manager and ever since subcontracting with the TEC and then delivering NVQs which we didn't want to deliver but we had no choice in the matter.[. . .] Unfortunately we also nowadays have to consider ways of generating money and that is bread and butter money, so you can do all the interesting things on top, we do other things. (Electronic Village Hall worker)

The EVHs, although innovative when established (in 1992) in the overall context of British community network development at the time, have become stunted in their growth, remaining too tied to their role as IT training institutions. However, there is a danger that even with recent significant awards of lottery funding, a patronizing and pedagogic approach to communities, either in the multimedia agencies or in MCIN itself will continue.

Community/civic information nodes like the Electronic Village Halls, from their inception, have been aimed primarily at improving community enterprise, following TEC schemes of training of unemployed people (Ducatel and Halfpenny, 1993: 372). However, it is unlikely they will break out of these constraints and become fully fledged community organizations even under more favourable economic conditions. As Bryan, in her study of MCIN noted there is a 'lack of political direction from Manchester City Council' in the area of community net development. With regard to content, however, she argues that the council has actually taken a realistic route because the electronic village halls operate best as moderate

'unbracketing mechanisms' (Bryan, 1998: 162) for realistically addressing the social and economic inequalities that need to be met before a viable civic net can be formed. Bryan does, however, admit that:

> The Manchester initiative, partly as a result of its economic focus, has not employed an idealised version of democracy nor has it associated itself with the establishment of a bourgeois public sphere, and this absence of democratic theory from its strategy for the future of the Information City initiative renders the project vulnerable to assertions that electronic networks can breed a new type of communicative citizen who is able to overcome architectural, geographical and economic displacement with access to online communities. (Bryan, 1998: 162–3)

However, a restricted democratic vision for community ICTs on the part of local authorities means that they will fail to engage with their role in fostering a local form of virtualized public sphere. Local democracy and participation can be popular when facilitated by quality civic networks, as can be seen from the success of sites like Amsterdam's De Digitale Stad (www.dds.nl/) or Bologna Iperbole (www.nettuno.it/bologna) (Aurigi and Graham, 1998). More adventurous British sites like the experimental Croydon Live (which has software in place for online voting and access to DIY web site authoring – www.croydon.live.com.uk) are also important in this respect. These sites, although not without their own problems, are beginning to set new benchmarks for community and civic nets, and suggest that more direct democratic forms of political deliberation, participation and governance could be popular. But without real commitment to community net development informing local authority ICT policies, the hopes for creating a vibrant and relevant civic network will flounder.

At present the MCIN site publishes page upon page of fairly flat, highly generalized information about council services, health and transport. Its most poplar page is the council's vacancy listings. As noted, Manchester City Council was at the forefront of civic net development in the early 1990s, with MCIN, its HOST server and its EVHs (Ducatel and Halfpenny, 1993: 369). However, as the following quotes note, it is now hindered by a legacy of bulletin board culture of information, Geonet (intranet status – no direct link to the Internet), low interactivity and limited options for dialogical communication:

> The HOST was a good idea for making information available to the Manchester public but it was most unfortunate that they took the wrong route. They came in at a time when the big thing was bulletin boards. They came in on that and it was just prior to the explosion of the Internet and windows this and web that. And for a long period they retained this most incredible thing whereby if you are using the HOST you could actually go on the web but it was just text based. (Community Network activist)

> Manchester HOST didn't want to go down the Internet route because it causes lots of problems – there's iffy material on it and the council didn't want to be seen as supporting it. And it held us back a bit. (Electronic Village Hall worker)

As a result of these factors MCIN has failed to develop from being simply a community information provider to a mature political forum. This lack of vision on the part of the council, the MCIN board and its advisers, restricts the development of a meaningful civic network. MCIN is important focus for criticism because it dominates community network provision in Manchester and effectively sets the tone for community politics in the city.

Manchester, like any other city council, is faced by competing strategic social and economic development constraints in its ICT policy formation. On one side is the need to create good local economic conditions, which will attract leading hi-tech R&D ICT companies. But the council itself has been slow to develop its own culture of public information dissemination, something that is in its own hands. The council's Telematics Development Policy, signalled in 1997 and promised for 1999, still awaits publication.[8] Like many other local authorities Manchester has failed to deliver a fully thought-out policy on public information dissemination and this is compounded by a poor culture of information provision within councils themselves. Not enough staff, time or back-up is being committed to meet the problem:

> If you are *au fait* with the Internet it's not the setting up of the site [that is the problem] it's getting the information to put on it really, and then keeping that information up to date. That is why the council has got this big battle to make people aware that they have the site and they can put their information on there and it's a free service. It's perceptions. They have struggled with the Press Office to get them to put their press releases on a disc so they can then easily be formatted for HTML and put them on the net. The technology is there but the way people use it is another issue. This is the issue of a strategy, an information strategy which they need to develop. (Community and Civic Software Solutions Company representative)

The city council's Economic Initiatives Department is conscious of the council's failings in this regard. Accessibility and information are only one aspect of this, though, and in the following quote the interviewee notes problems of bureaucratic rigidity and a poor internal communication system:

> Manchester City Council's web site [. . .] has grown quite a lot and they work with MCIN so a lot of council information is linked to that site. So we are trying to make things more accessible in a friendly way. I suppose what we have neglected is the internal things and we still need to develop an intranet so that we can share information among ourselves. In an organization this size one of the things that people complain about is that they don't know what things are going on in other areas and offices and what they can use.[. . .] So we are trying to develop an intranet. (ICT officer: Manchester City Council)

Relevance of information and community participation

If community nets are to be popular they have to provide relevant information (Howley, 1998). For any community information provider the crucial category for its assessment here is the range and *quality* of information it provides on local area networks. As stated, MCIN information tends to be bland bulletin boards put on to the network by its main information providers. Although this form of community information is important for improving access to services and assessing them, it does not go very far beyond reduced, *moyen-political* horizons for the local public sphere. Community networkers have strong criticisms of the quality of information provision in civic networks. As the following quote indicates, they are calling for *relevant* NetWare and information, rather than simply bulletin boards, or IT skills training:

> If I hear any more about multimedia kiosks I will go mad. So what are you going to put on them, just another A–Z of the council's services? – I could pick up a telephone directory [to do that]. You could do a lot more if you put the money into the organizations that are actually providing the services. (Electronic Village Hall worker)

Due to the pedantic and pedagogic attitude to urban community and organizations on the part of cultural intermediaries in the partnership and public agencies, the community networks tend to be empty vessels – having little in the way of relevant information:

> They don't realize that what you have to do in terms of public access means not giving simply access to the Internet but access to knowledge. You get things like virtual guides to Manchester and why are they not used that much? It's because the content is empty, literally. (Manchester Community Network activist)

> [I]f you are looking at use of web the use will only come if there is something of use for your community. Now the most successful web sites are those based around communities of use, like business and professional women's organizations. I am in contact with women all around the world because it's of use to me but if someone said 'go and look at the City Council web site' I doubt I would as a user. (Public Information Network organizer)

These comments reveal a concern about relevance and quality of information – issues at the heart of setting up, running and evaluating community nets (Rosenbaum, 1998). Relevant information content depends accessing the knowledge and experience of local communities, something that can only be addressed by longer-term involvement and by listening to their information needs:

> We did a community project in Salford, unemployed women, problem kids and abused relationships, a drop in centre. We had 12 women on this course, one

> day a week with me and one day with their coordinator, and we showed them how to use the web and got them to do web pages and their own projects. We also did brainstorming things and we targeted Salford City Council web site and asked them to look at it for half and hour and then asked the what they thought should be on or off it. And we got 'Why have they got that on? It's no use to us.' I got a lot out of it because what they were concerned with was things like the bus timetables, chemists open late and where is the emergency doctor. (Public Information Network organizer)

So alongside creative and innovative web site design, relevant information is the value-added element in good civic ICT, which must go alongside the provision of community information base nodes such as the EVHs. And relevance of information can only really be understood by involving the communities concerned in network development.

An example of the multi-dimensionality and specificity of relevance can be seen in the case of the Bangladeshi EVH in east Manchester, one of the poorer areas of the city. This group argue that the community foundation and geographical location of the EVHs and their broader cultural concerns need to be stressed if they are to become flourishing community institutions, rather than simply their technical capability as an ICT interface:

> The Women's Electronic Hall had always done this 'Telematics is going to save the world' sort of thing which we never did (we have always hated the word telematics in any case) and also we recognize it was an outpost of IT which only 5 percent of users would use and they certainly wouldn't use it all the time, use it for half an hour a day at most.[. . .] So we are different from someone who is saying 'You can use telematics to make sure there is an even playing field so that you can integrate people usually excluded from society' – load of bollocks. IT enables you to do work around those issues, campaigning for access to statutory services or whatever. (Bangladeshi EVH worker)

For community networkers at the Bangladeshi EVH, ICT doesn't really supply ready answers to some of their more immediate problems of sustaining their culture and identity in east Manchester, and maintaining links back to Bangladesh itself:

> People have different agendas, you have a group who are interested in the political news from Bangladesh, another group interested in the novelty aspect but then realize fax is a lot easier and cheaper. Then a group that think it will be useful for import export but then it isn't, fax is easier. We have always been critical of the technology and said email may not be for you but better to use the fax machine. What with Internet and ISDN charges – why not just give them a piece of fax paper – you can write in Bengali on that and you can't on the computer. And people respect us for that they say 'You are honest, you aren't trying to sell us a computer or piece of software.' (Bangladeshi EVH worker)

But this should not mean that community ICTs are irrelevant for this community. Simply, when confronted by specific needs and problems of

application ICT has to be community informed and made to provide relevant solutions.

Relevance also means the recognition of the status of community EVHs as institutions that can play a part in the wider politics of running the city. In 1998 East Manchester Regeneration won SRB monies for redeveloping the A6 'Stockport Road Corridor' district which contains the Bangladeshi EVH. Initially, the EVH was left out of the consultation and bidding, and it was only at a later stage that it was considered as a valuable agency in legitimating the planning process. Although there as an after-thought, freed from their limited role as an ICT training base, they could then start to articulate their concerns as a community institution:

> The people that live here [. . .] have a different agenda. They want to know why they can't go out at night after 8 o'clock without fear of being beaten up. And that wasn't originally in, [only when] the community was brought in later. They talked to individuals whilst they put the bids together and it's only been the bigger organizations that have been able to get in there. Now fortunately because of our relationship with the TEC they recognized we were working in the area and they would lose a lot of face if they didn't involve one of the few training organizations they had in the area. So we got involved that way. (Bangladeshi EVH worker)

Relevancy, then, means much more than information, technological hardware or control. It has numerous dimensions, some of which need infrastructural developments or more accessible interfaces, others demand holistic responses in terms of accessing community knowledge and power, and fostering democratic accountability and participation.

Community organizations need to be the principal suppliers of information and they should be the key agents in the design of their own web pages. This also means developing critical awareness of the potentially conservative and paternalist control of local community and civic nets in organizations like MCIN and the Multimedia and Network Centre. Relevance and community and ICT design must go together, an equation that allows communities to generate the information in response to their needs.

Denis McQuail has argued that in studying the social impact of any new communications technology one should be careful not to over-concentrate on the nature and quality of the content of information carried by it:

> Initially, at least, the content is likely to show a good deal of continuity with what is carried by the 'old media' and thus may not be a good guide to what is really novel. The impact of such content is also likely to be shaped by the needs and circumstances of receivers, which are not likely to change suddenly or quickly.[. . .] [A]ttention from the start should be concentrated on perceptions and behaviours rather than on content and effects. (McQuail, 1987: 432–3)

However, quality of information content is a key factor in any assessment of civic networks laying the grounds for good community nets, and this

should serve as a countervailing pole to the allure of consumerism in developing community nets. The nature and quality of information on local community and civic networks is a crucial indicator of the state of relations of power in a local polity. As Foster notes, there must be opportunities freely to place community information if the 'we-concerns' of identifiable communities are to be articulated:

> Community, then, is built by a sufficient flow of 'we-relevant' information. The 'we' or the collective identity that results is structured around others who are seen as similar to the 'me'. (Foster, 1997: 25)

Relevance of information is what builds community but, as we have noted, much of the information on the MCIN network is, with a few exceptions, actually oriented to 'you-relevant' information as a general public information network. This makes it only superficially community or local in its content.

Local government as guardian of the local virtual public sphere: critical regionalism

> In the Manchester scene what really surprises me is – within these various partnerships it seems that they have all these resources but how effectively are those resources being used? Don't misunderstand me, I think the people who work in all those partnerships are doing a great job – but the vision isn't there. (Manchester Community Networker activist)

The local character of the Internet is poised at the crossroads of commodification and popular civic net development. In terms of the public sphere the Internet has become a key site where geographical space and identity can be articulated in a dialectic of community and political communication. Local authorities now need policies to guide a civic vision of how the local public sphere will be constituted and the role of civic and community nets in this. Without this it will be difficult in combating the colonization of telematics development by corporate ICT companies or the interests of the cultural intermediary class fraction. But, as we have seen, local partnership agencies seem to be 'missing the point' about the relationship between community, communication and the public sphere.

In a seminal article on community networks, Friedland notes how it is possible to transform communities' 'social capital' into political power. The successful ventures have managed to develop away from over-concern with technological fixes to a centring concern with community:

> From the standpoint of democratic communication, the most successful community networking projects are those that have moved from early concerns with technology to a broader social and community orientation. Each of the models

> considered here has broadened community support (whether those communities are local, regional or virtual). And many observers and practitioners of community networking agree that for community networks to avoid implosion under an onslaught of commercial providers they will have to deepen their local roots. (Friedland, 1996: 196)

Friedland provides a number of models for more participative, informational relevant approaches to civic nets. 'Advocacy networks', associated with new social movement activity have high degrees of information relevance to their members, and help to build up their social/networking capital. Friedland gives as examples of this the IGC global network, which promotes social justice, and HandsNet, a local network in California set up to counter hunger and malnutrition. As this developed a decentralized information-rich network resulted:

> As more partners were added, a critical mass began to be reached which transformed loosely connected organizations into learning networks producing their own information. The social capital base developed through these networks has allowed new models of information brokering to emerge, based on distributed responsibility. As networks solidify and new social capital relations emerge, the production of information begins to be radically decentralized, since each point in the network becomes a potential information gathering and distribution node. (Friedland, 1996: 194)

Friedland outlines a number of other models of citizen networks, such as direct community involvement in planning and local economic development (1996: 199). Another model he describes is 'electronic public journalism', which can act as a means to articulate the full range of community voices inevitably subordinated in conventional broadcasting and journalism. Such pathways facilitate community-based and civic telematics and enhance local democracy:

> In essence all of these models of developing social capital by ICT enable better democratic capacity and challenge and deepen deliberative democratic concepts to rebuild civil society. The new social capital relations that emerge from these networks ground deliberation in the concrete practice of citizens, a much richer set of relations than could be developed through polling and the mass media alone. (Friedland, 1996: 207)

Putting too great an emphasis on, for example, hi-tech public-access terminals, deflects attention and resources from the more difficult and challenging problems of activating the communities within the city by appropriate community-led information networks. In order to keep this to the forefront of community telematics development, it is crucial that these networks are delivered into the hands of the communities themselves. Community and civic networks need to be community-led and politicized, and this means a radical rethinking of local governmental public information policy, the nature, control and constitution of ICT partnerships, and council telecommunications and public information policy itself.

To achieve this local authorities need to adopt a more critical, political and reflexive view of their role in community net development. Morley and Robins argue for a 'critical regionalism' in local government to revive the local public sphere and foster a 'sub-politics' on this material basis:

> Public discourse, grounded in a spatial framework, could be elaborated in a local public sphere. In this context, media culture must be seen as part of a much broader strategy for local development through the stimulation of cultural innovation, identity and difference. Whilst such localism could, of course, degenerate into introverted and nostalgic historicism and heritage fixation, local attachment can be seen in more radical and innovative terms. New conditions of mobility make local attachment not a matter of ascribed and determined identity but increasingly a question of choice, decision and variability. Local cultures are, moreover, permeated and suffused by external influences.[. . .] [L]ocal culture can only be constituted now as locally inflected manifestations of global culture. What is called for [. . .] is a strategy of Critical Regionalism to 'mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place'. (Morley and Robins, 1995: 41)

In light of this city councils would thus need to foster local civic nets which are informed by a clear understanding of the local cultural politics of community. The constitution of the meaning of community in community networks is the outcome of relations of power and there needs to be critical awareness of this in local authority community telematics policy formation. This critical awareness may well be threatened in partnerships with the commercial sector, and the priority must be in the fostering of dedicated community and civic information networkers and agencies, and putting the networks more thoroughly in the hands of the communities of use.

The local state is becoming the key political agency that may be able to offset the structural power of corporate capital in a period when the apparatus of the nation state is withered by globalization:

> Thus the current death dance between identities, nations, and states, leaves, on one hand, historically emptied nation-states, drifting on the high seas of global flows of power; on the other hand, fundamental identities, retrenched in their communities or mobilized toward the uncompromising capture of an embattled nation-state; in between, the local state strives to rebuild legitimacy and instrumentality by navigating transition networks and integrating local civil societies. (Castells, 1997: 276)

But to rebuild legitimacy the local state must consciously support real-space local communities and their identities as a counter to the threat of a fully commercialized Internet. The defence of community, however newly constituted, be it diasporic or heterogeneously articulated with older place-bound identitites, will increasingly depend on the capacity to build functioning, interactive, and relevant local civic nets (Schuler, 1996). These can help to offset and combat other forces of global society, the commercial and consumerist 'tribalist threats' (Nguyen and Alexander,

1996: 116) to urbanity and publicness in the local public sphere. Otherwise consumerist, leisure-led telematics development plays into the hands of both corporate and *moyen-cultural* intermediary forces and brings virtual forms of 'bread and circuses'.

Notes

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1. Examples of more interactive forms of civic sites in Britain are Hantsweb (www.hants.gov.uk) and Powys County Council (www.powys.gov.uk).
2. Telecities started in 1993 and is described as an 'open network for concerted urban development through telematics' that works to a 'common definition regarding the urban demand for telematics and moves towards standardizing approaches to developing interactivity' (www.edc.eu:int/in-action/library.html).
3. See: www.edc.eu:int/in-action/library.html.
4. See www.mymanchester.net.uk
5. The TARDIS kiosks are located at the *Big Issue* office, Central Library, Gorton North Neighbourhood Office, Kathy Locke Health and Community Resource Centre, Manchester College of Art and Technology (MANCAT).
6. This sees 'entrepreneurship and creativity [as the] key requirements for the future' of public ICT development in Europe (www.edc.eu:int/in-action/library.html).
7. A brash and combative regional identity or attitude, summed up by personalities in the group Oasis.
8. Five strategic principles were approved by the council in July 1997. These include targeting: (1) learning; (2) local services; (3) economic development'; (4) quality of life; (5) Manchester as international city of the future. ('A Telematics Strategy for Manchester', Economic Initiatives Group, Town Hall, Manchester M60 2LA).

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