December 1998

Information Societal Issues and the Community

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Abstract

This paper explores some issues related to the introduction of information technology into communities. Using a project under development in Salford UK, the paper suggests that a focus on information or information technology may be inappropriate due to wide ranging issues that such projects encounter. Following this conclusions are drawn and insights into the ongoing research are stated.

Introduction

Information technology is pervading society in a wide ranging manner, 'information technology is increasingly being used in systems with potential for societal impacts' (Wood-Harper et al 1996). Indeed, information technology is moving away from traditional areas such as large organizations and businesses and into the wider community. There exists real risk to society if the introduction of such technology into communities is not handled with due consideration, 'many technical professionals have viewed social concerns as peripheral' (Phil Agre 1996 in Kling 1998). Moreover some advocate the use of such technology to socially engineer such communities. Given that little is known about the effects of such interventions this paper will use a project that is running within the GEMISIS 2000 scheme, described below, to illustrate some difficulties in applying social informatics. This can be seen as an exploration of information societal issues and the community. The project concerned is the Little Hulton Community Campus project or LHCC, as developed by the chief executive department of Salford City Council. One of the aims of this project is to 'provide the right information, at the right time, in the right place via the right delivery method.' The project was also to raise awareness of the technology and information, provide access and develop content. In order to explore the issues of social informatics within the LHCC case a conceptual framework was devised and used, this is explained in the section below. Following this the analysis of the LHCC case study is given. Conclusions are then drawn together with latest developments from the research project.

Guiding the Exploration

The following framework was designed to focus attention on community or societal issues within the LHCC project and to guide and inform the exploration of that situation. It draws heavily from the ethical methodological ideas espoused by (Wood-Harper et al 1996). The framework consists of three main elements 1) **Soft Systems Methodology:** (Checkland, Checkland and Scholes) which provides a structure for the investigation and invaluable techniques to explore the situation. The problem situation will be explored using the 'rich picture,' 'CATWOE' and 'root definition' techniques from SSM. This will not only form a platform for other analysis but will hopefully develop understanding of the situation and among participants. 2) **Stakeholder Analysis and Assumption Surfacing:** (Wood-Harper et al 1996) suggest the use of stakeholder analysis and assumption surfacing for ethical analysis. Stakeholder analysis allows participants to explicitly develop an understanding of all those who affect or are affected by decisions taken (Mitroff & Linstone 1993). "a basic tenet of moral theories is to treat people with respect which can be done only if the interests of all concerned people are honestly considered." (Messick and Bazerman 1996). 3) **Normative Ethical Theories:** Normative ethical theories will be used, within this framework, to guide and inform the exploration of the situation given below. The ethical theories tend to fall into two groups, rules and consequences, described by Laudon (1995): "ehicists who are in the 'rules' camp believe good actions result from following the correct rules of behaviour, which generally are thought to be universal and applicable to all... ethicists who focus on consequences, in contrast believe general rules are not specific enough to guide action and feel instead that we must look to the consequences of our actions." (Laudon 1995). The ethical theories used in this framework adapted from Mason et al (1995) are: **Rules**, prima facie: duties, rights, privileges, responsibilities; **Consequences**: egoism, consequentialism, utilitarianism.

A Community Campus

The research arena for the study represented in this paper is within a scheme known as GEMISIS 2000. GEMISIS or Government, Education, Medical, Industrial and Social Information Superhighway is a unique partnership led opportunity that is, service and community based, to exploit the sociological, economic and technological benefits of the Information Superhighway. "To use the information superhighway to serve the community... rather than just entertain it.". (GEMISIS 1996). The strategy is: "To pilot in Salford, the Greater Manchester region and beyond new applications of the information

superhighway which exploit the sociological, economic, technological and quality of life benefits of broadband fibre optic cable for local people." (GEMISIS 1996). From the strategy detailed above a number of objectives are sort that are pertinent to this study , these include: to develop information technologies which achieve the maximum benefit for the community; to promote economic regeneration; to improve the quality of life for the community

Little Hulton is a community that Salford City Council and its partners believe could benefit from the careful introduction of information services through the GEMISIS scheme. A number of projects are underway or planned, presenting an opportunity to explore issues that are related to the introduction of information services into the community. The LHCC project is partly funded through the single regeneration budget challenge fund initiative, its main aim is to encourage social and economic regeneration. The analysis below shows that there are divergent issues within community informatics, that 'word of mouth' communication is still important and that delivery may be focused on particular projects rather than technology.

Divergent Issues

A number of issues arose from various meetings within a community group, known as the **L**ittle Hulton **I**nformation **D**evelopment **O**rganization or LIDO, that shows the diversity of thought and analysis needed to confront information societal issues.

- The physical and structural impact of the information technology was seen by some to be very important, that is the changes required to physical buildings and work structures to allow members of the community to have access to the information technology. For example in order for the community based school to offer access to information technology changes to the school layout was needed along with changes to some teachers roles. These factors must be taken into consideration when introducing information technology into the community.
- Introducing information technology into the community is an expensive exercise, therefore monetary issues cannot be overlooked. As mentioned above the LHCC is partly funded through a social regeneration initiative but other funding was needed. This additional or 'matched' funding came from a variety of sources, needing careful balancing and management.
- The management of time is also crucial to the success of the LHCC intervention, partly due to the various funding bodies assessment criteria and the need to keep the members of the community interested in the venture, whose support is vital.
- Another issue, related to the structural concerns but mainly a social issue, was how to provide adults with access to the information technology within the school site whilst keeping the pupils of the school secure, school security is a topic of some concern within the UK. There is a need to balance the rights and concerns of one section of a community with another, here the adults have a right to access to information and information technology but this must be balanced with the rights of school pupils to feel and be secure.
- There was a view that the information technology should be secondary to the need for social inclusion within the community. There should be opportunities for people to come together in a social setting were information technology 'was available.' This can be seen as information technology being used for social inclusion rather than social isolation.

From the above we can see that issues within the LHCC are not limited to information or information technology but can arise out of the delivery of information via the projects. Therefore, issues concerning LHCC stem from a broad spectrum of domains, including: **Information**, **Structural**, **Time**, **Monetary** and **Social**. In other words, the introduction of information technology into the community impacts on a wide range of issues that cannot be ignored. The issues that have been identified here may not be replicated in other situations, however, focusing on information or information technology may not be sufficient.

Word of Mouth

Another important issue that was raised within the various community groups was the notion of information diffusion via 'word of mouth'. It was recognized that while information technology could provide some information to some members of the community the vast amount of information diffusion would be, for the foreseeable future, via word of mouth. With this in mind community officers devised a number of plans to assist in the diffusion of information throughout the community. These included:

- The support of community representatives, recognizing that 'community representatives come into contact with a great many people, both on an informal basis and at public meetings, ' to 'help them become real live carriers of accurate information;'
- The community participation network, which co-ordinates community officers and representatives

While recognizing the role of 'word of mouth' for the diffusion of information throughout the community other methods were not dismissed, rather a range of delivery methods was considered including: word of mouth; press; newsletters; information technology and community/officer networks. Information technology is not a replacement for other information delivery methods but it can act within a co-ordinated community based information strategy, information technology may assist in this co-ordinating process.

Delivery of Information Services

The diffusion of information or information services within the LHCC is via a number of specific projects that are sponsored by disparate groups. It is the concentration on projects rather than technology that enables the LHCC to focus on the needs of the community and helps to avoid a technological led project. For example the Business Centre objectives include: the production of training services and materials for advanced technology and community based training programmes; support training; provide trainee jobs; be income generating. While all these activities require information technology, there is a business or community/social objective that uses technology which is not the same as using technology to achieve objectives or blindly introducing technology. As 'social concerns are central and define the ground that technical work stands on.' (Phil Agre 1996 in Kling 1998). This focus seems to be different from other similar projects such as a similarly funded project in Merseyside, UK which seems to have a technological focus, namely the Internet (Charlton et al 1997). One may also site the Malaysian Mutilmedia Supe Corridor (Kamsah et al 1997) as being technologically led.

Conclusion

Looking again at the issues that emerged from an initial exploration of the LHCC project one notion seems to dominate, that is focusing on information or information technology is not sufficient for projects that introduce such technology or ideas into a communities. Issues from a broad range of areas will emerge from any such intervention and will need to be addressed. It should also be noted that information technology cannot replace other forms of community based information delivery, instead it must act within the community's information strategy. Any such interventions into communities should be 'socially-driven rather than technically-driven' (Kling 1998). In order to take a closer look at this issue the following ideas will be introduced to enrich the conceptual framework: that information is data or 'capta' that is interpreted or made meaningful by people (Checkland & Howell 1998); that a collection of data is not enough to influence action, it is the act of people engaging in such data that may lead to knowledge which in turn may be a potential for appropriate action. (Churchman 1971); taking the view that an information exists to serve a human activity system, further investigation is needed into the system that is being served, namely the community members system used to manage their lives (Checkland & Howell 1998). These new ideas may help to understand the emerging issue of engagement, which can be thought of as the engagement of community members in information resulting in action being taken.

References

References available upon request from Brian Byrne.