

5 Initial conclusions

This paper has attempted to synthesise knowledge from the areas of community development, social capital and ICT in order to consider how the three concepts interact and overlap. The key findings from the case studies indicate some broad lessons across the range of geographic and virtual communities.

It is important to note that the use of networks by communities and the level of trust and sustainability in each will vary according to developmental stage. Newly formed virtual communities will face very different issues to those that have operated for several years. Building social capital (bonding, bridging or linking) is a long term endeavour influenced by many factors.

There is an advantage for virtual communities that develop within the context of an organisation or a service provider with an established, trusted reputation. In addition, organisations that provide a facilitator, coordinator or list manager who is able to moderate online interaction add to the sense that their sites care about professional integrity. Such organisations often provide technical, administrative and financial support and infrastructure. Virtual communities that have the active support of an organisational structure generally benefit from increased access to other resources and so are inherently more sustainable.

Centres that offer Internet access to geographic communities can have an important impact, the level of which will depend on the existing infrastructure, patterns of interaction, the model of development and the available resources. Again, organisational support plays an important role in development and sustainability. The sharing of resources and aggregation of demand make sustainability more likely, especially in terms of the technical support, training and/or expertise essential for continuing development.

The type of social capital developed (bonding, bridging or linking) varies according to factors including community focus, professional facilitation, awareness and technological design. For example, the intention of communities of circumstance is generally to build bonding capital. In this sense they provide the individual with a sense of not being alone in their particular circumstance, as in the case of *depressioNet*, or communities set up for disaster support. While many such groups exist in the physical realm, online communities of circumstance overcome the obstacles of time, distance and geography. In particular circumstances the anonymity provided by the virtual realm may overcome social and psychological barriers and lead to benefits for marginalised groups in society.

Trust is a central and contentious element in the development of virtual communities. Trust in the group and its members is essential to the development of bonding, bridging and linking social capital. The case studies point to several factors that contribute to trust—including reputation, the conscious effort to impose boundaries via membership and form and quality of online engagement. Membership is often open to all applicants but in other cases referral is necessary from another trusted member. Trust in geographically based communities (e.g. *Networked Neighbourhoods* and *Netville*) is less of an issue as it is based on face-to-face interaction.

Bonding across smaller groups (for example an ethnic group in a larger housing estate like e-ACE) is easier to build than broader bonding capital (around the whole housing estate and across ethnic divisions). Development of broader bonding, bridging or linking social capital is unlikely to occur without facilitation except in communities that are inherently structured to achieve this goal. Social service providers and practitioners may play a major role in developing and nurturing bridging capital (Onyx & Leonard 2000).

Communities structured to achieve broader bonding, bridging and linking social capital can do so in several ways. First, communities of purpose/practice have at their core the intention to bridge organisational divisions and bring people together to work on a particular issue or practice area. By virtue of their purpose they encourage bridging and linking and this is often the appeal of these communities for those who are members.

Other community types may intentionally structure themselves to develop social capital. For example, the dEadly mOb seeks to develop broader bonding amongst Indigenous young people throughout Australia and to facilitate bridging and linking social capital through their role modelling and mentoring program. It nurtures bridging capital to help young people to connect to career, employment and life opportunities.

One further factor is that not all social capital is positive. Strong bonding capital can have the effect of isolating groups within a community or excluding others from participating. Some groups may work against social norms and promote anti-social behaviour but nonetheless have strong social capital among members. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that bridging and linking capital can produce positive or negative effects. The presence of organisational support and professional practitioners is more likely to channel the development of social capital in a positive direction.

The structure that underlies communities and facilitates social capital is a matter of conceptual design and technological application. Conceptual design refers to the planning of a website's appearance and main objectives and how those objectives might be accomplished. The technical application involves making those goals operational in a functional and efficient way. Evidence from the case studies indicates that both conceptualisation and application vary according to the organisational base and available expertise. At the same time, the applications must be accessible to members of the communities. In many cases advanced applications require access to higher bandwidth—a further potential obstacle to access, depending on cost and availability.

This paper assumes that ICT has a role to play in building social capital, yet that role will depend on how individuals, communities, organisations and governments incorporate ICT into their lives and social structures. However, this is determined by context, impetus and sustainability. The functionality of the technology (e.g. the presence or absence of broadband connectivity, the ease of use) is also an important factor. Further investigation of the impact of broadband on community development could be a valuable next step.

A whole of community perspective

The concept of building ‘learning’ or ‘creative’ communities is one dynamic application of the theoretical framework outlined in this paper.

Basic infrastructure (electricity, water, roads, etc) relates to the needs and capabilities of individuals, organisations and institutions and the wider community. It is the foundation necessary for higher level community development. The increasingly technological nature of society means ICT can—and should—now be considered as one of the critical elements of this underlying (supportive) infrastructure.

With the provision of this basic infrastructure, individuals can engage with government, nonprofit organisations, business and civil society to access services and meet higher needs including those related to education, health, housing, transport, creativity and culture.

Individuals or groups in geographically based ICT enabled communities may find themselves connected to one or more different forms of online communities. Online participation can lead to greater face-to-face participation within the geographic community. Relationships therefore form in both directions, with one potentially increasing the likelihood of the other. Such interactions have implications for the evolution of mature service delivery by e-government and the growth of new e-business products and services to consumers and communities.

The overall proposition is that through access and effective use of ICT individuals and communities have a greater opportunity for engagement with others, broadening their understandings and building bonding, bridging and linking capital. Greater participation in communities is assumed to contribute to stronger social capital within the community at the local, state, national and global levels and hence contribute to improved economic and social outcomes.

This ‘whole-of-community’ perspective on the potential benefits of ICT provides a possible focus for future research into the dynamics of ‘learning’ or ‘creative’ communities.