ABSTRACT

Indiana's Community Networking Movement: Websites Then and Now

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This study involved determining the status and nature of Indiana's geographically-based community networks (CNs) by conducting a content analysis of their websites and comparing the results to those from Rosenbaum's (1998) content analysis. Purposes of this study were:

• To develop a snapshot of the state of community networks in Indiana now as compared to when they were first funded
• To follow up on recommendations from Rosenbaum and Gregson's (1998) study of Indiana's community networks
• To highlight digital trends, identify opportunities and threats, and develop some predictions about the future of Indiana's community networks
• To examine Indiana's community networking movement from a social informatics perspective (Kling et al., 2005) by looking beyond the technical capabilities afforded by the Internet to the social and cultural context in which the movement was embedded.

In 1997, there were 27 active community networks in Indiana. Results from the follow-up website content analysis revealed that in 2005:

1. Of the 17 remaining active CNs, only four (4) are ISPs; the remainder are digital information centers providing varying levels of content
2. CN Boards have likely not been sharing best practices, as they do not cross-link to each other
3. Surviving CNs have established themselves as mature non-profit organizations with unique identities, but precise level of CN-community integration varies and will be studied further in later research papers
4. As a whole, CNs are providing more local content, but fewer services, such as computer training and locations of public access terminals; there is no evidence of getting user input
5. The Access Indiana state-wide strategy did not appear to successfully address sustainability, as 9 of the 27 original CNs are now defunct, 3 are stagnant, and 1 is now run by another entity; also significantly fewer websites now link to Access Indiana and the Indiana Community Network Association (ICNA)
The failure of Indiana's community networking movement to strongly take hold supports Bellamy & Taylor's (1998) three main points about community networking policy:

1. Creating an electronic public domain, such as a community network, must be explicitly designed at the outset and appropriately resourced, rather than assuming it will emerge as a logical outcome.

2. Successful local community networks require strategic partnerships - "sustained collaboration between and within public, voluntary and commercial agencies" (Bellamy & Taylor, 1998, p. 115).

3. Community networks should be used to enhance representative democracy by enabling "new forms of popular deliberation and direct participation" (p. 115) that can provide strategic guidance to elected officials.

This follow-up website content analysis was simply a first phase of a broader research agenda. Future research on Indiana's community networks will examine the issues of social capital, collaboration, and electronic governance in more detail.

References


