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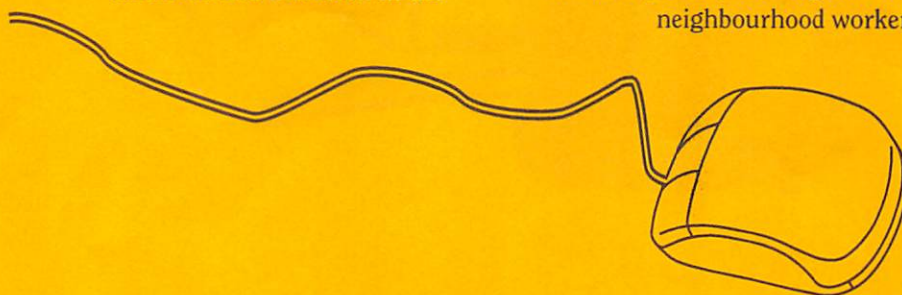
How **Community** work became **computer** work...

Greg Smith works as research officer at CREDO, part of Aston Charities Community Involvement Unit. Recent rapid changes in information and communications technology have had major impacts on global society. In the developed world at least the information revolution has huge implications for the practice of community development. The management of these changes in the voluntary and community sector has been problematic, and for many practitioners and the communities they work with an oppressive experience. Based on many years' experience in urban community work and information collection, Greg's article questions the extent to which information technology and community development can work together, and concludes that community workers should not rush headlong into a virtual blind alley.

THE RECENT RAPID growth in information technology has had major global economic and social impacts especially in the developed world and has led to much comment by academics, journalists and visionaries. There has been concern expressed about employment and education as well as about exclusion and inclusion in the

information society.

In the voluntary sector in the UK there has been some discussion of management issues around the introduction of new technology to larger charities. However, there appears to be little discussion of the impact of IT on the practice of community development, especially in the day to day life of grass roots neighbourhood workers.




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Personal experience

My personal perspective on IT could be described as that of 'Luddite in an Anorak'. Let me say that as a researcher and a writer I find computers and the Internet an invaluable tool. As a millennial man I find they are quite fun too; I can't switch mine off and I love teaching three-year-olds how to use them, and learning from seven-year-olds the latest tricks they have discovered.

But in my role as a community worker and as a manager in the voluntary sector the technology often causes more grief than it is worth. I am reflecting here on the changes in the nature of my work over nearly 25 years.

In 1975 when I started my career, community organisations had a typewriter and a phone with a nice round dial, and if they were lucky a Roneo or Gestetner duplicator. The luckiest ones might even have a grant from the Council to pay for their



staff. There were usually lots of people around with time to spare. When I first saw and used a computer in about 1977 it filled a large room in a university several miles from my base that I wasn't allowed to go in to. Eventually after many misplaced commas had delayed me by 24 hours each time I made it do calculations by feeding in a ten-inch deep deck of punched cards. Today even the smallest organisation seems to have a PC (though not always the skill to use it properly) and we are all being urged to get into email and the Internet. The bigger and more prosperous groups have a bewildering array of high tech equipment and lots of staff who sit at VDU screens. They may also have a contract to deliver services with quantifiable outputs meeting rigorously defined quality standards. Some office-based 'community workers' I know rarely meet with members of the community where they are located.

Community Work is traditionally about people and values. I became a

community worker because I wanted to work with people. And it was because of specific values I held, in my case values that were Christian and socialist, egalitarian and humanitarian. I may have been naive, but I wanted to transform society for the better. And I thought you could do it best by organising collectively rather than just bringing first aid to social casualties. That's why I chose community work and not social work. I chose to work in the voluntary and church sector because that was where other people shared my values and were willing to work hard and loyally together following these values, always in theory at least putting the needs of people before the pursuit of money. I fear that my own flight from community work to computer work has eroded those values at every level, and that I am not flying solo or in control of this journey. Many other community workers and other caring professionals are strapped into the same airliner.

One can argue about the balance of blame to be put on economics (the triumph of the market), on politics (Thatcher and the New Labour Right) and the new technologies (Bill Gates and the Microsoft monopoly). But they are all jointly and severely responsible for the McDonaldisation and Disneyfication of our world. I go on now to discuss five key areas in which developments in IT present a challenge to the practice of community workers.

1 Locality

The first casualty in the way between IT and community work is the notion and practice of locality and neighbourhood. The internet in particular produces global specialist networks and the expense of local face to face ones. Indeed cyber technologies are in some senses placeless. One can know a lot, or



rather compile a lot of information, about a place without being there, through statistics, remote cameras, databases of local services. One can even participate by email in local political debates about plans for new housing and traffic regulation.

But how can one appreciate a community holistically, or work as a community worker within it unless you live and participate in the locality, walk the streets, shop in the market, send your kids to the local school, smell the stink of the local factory, worship at the local church or mosque, recognise at least 100 faces in the street in any given week?

And even if your notion of community is not so parochial, but about networks of friends or work colleagues, or ethnic community in dispersion across the city, it is still the case that every minute spent in front of a VDU screen (be it TV or PC) is one less minute to be spent in human face to face interaction.

Even in a global economy with instant communication locality remains important. Despite technology human beings as persons manifest in a mortal body cannot be in two places at once. Despite travel opportunities, which are unequally distributed by age, gender, income and ethnicity, many, probably most people, retain local identities and a degree of territoriality.

Issues of housing, economic development, planning and environment, education and employment, health and social services which form the everyday routine of community workers remain locally rooted. While national and international politics are increasingly conducted via the mass media, politicians continue to represent geographical constituencies and in the case of councillors quite small neighbourhoods. Although decision making is often remote the need for local organising to challenge

it remains, although new forms of city wide and issue based coalition and partnership building are emerging.

And it is here that telematics has something significant to offer to community workers and community groups as electronic information sharing makes it easier to identify allies, discover key facts, exchange documents and reduce the need for costly mailshots, face to face meetings of national committees and residential conferences which poorer people cannot afford. One could argue that as environmental pressures increase that a green future for community work should involve more local face to face activity, supplemented by global cyber connectivity and a severe rationing of travel which depends on fossil fuels.

2 Communication and alienation

New technology also brings a challenge to community work in the realm of communication. We need to consider carefully communication needs and strategies in our work before buying in to the solutions offered by computer sales people. Electronic communication is great for national

organisations with branches and networks which span regions and continents. However for small organisations with a single office or base it is not usually appropriate or effective.

How many ephemeral messages need to be recorded electronically anyway, when pencil and paper or a walk across the office, or down the street for a chat is readily available, more reliable and probably less stressful. The number of the post it notes stuck on computers in many high-tec offices suggests that staff know there is often a better medium than email. Indeed traditional forms of communication are usually more effective in getting a result in terms of sharing information or persuading people to do things. Many community workers have learned that a face to face conversation is usually best, followed by a phone call. Commit something to paper and it ends in the filing cabinet or waste paper basket, with electronic information it is all too easy to find the recycle bin.

Communication in community work is not so much about the



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medium as about the need and the willingness to communicate, to share information, and to build relationships. The daily hello and good bye, the moaning about the weather or the world cup, the chat at coffee break. All these do far more for good staff, volunteer or management-committee relationships and team building than sharing an electronic diary or group emails.

The process of personal networking is a key element of effective community work (Gilchrist 1998). It should however be distinguished conceptually from electronic networking although it can be analysed formally using the same mathematical techniques (Smith 1996). In fact communication by computer tends to distance people from each other, you lose the eye contact, the tone of voice the body language. For most people (especially men?) the fact that you are sitting staring into a screen and spiritually chained to a keyboard reduces the potential for human contact, even for noticing the person who has just come into the room. The computer office then is an alienating environment, separating people from

customers, and separating individuals from ownership and involvement in their work (classic Marxism). All very alarming for those who share the classical humanistic values of the voluntary sector and who recognise the need for interpersonal skills in community development.

3 Information overload and essential knowledge

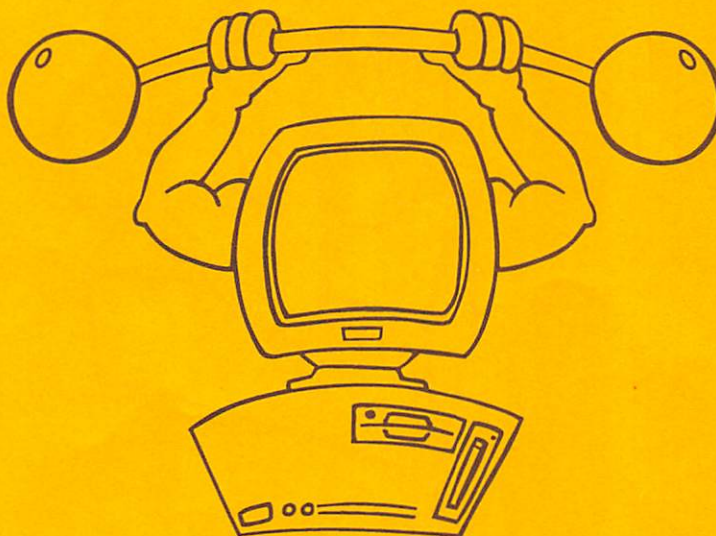
IT and the Net in particular brings the promise of ready access to encyclopedic knowledge, almost to omniscience. Perhaps we should resist this as human hubris, pride which puts our puny selves on the level of God. But more practically it is never more than potential knowledge, and most of the global information bank can never be of much use to us for two reasons. Firstly the human mind has limits for absorbing and storing information. Many people in middle age and middle management like myself complain about the amount and complexity of information to be stored in one head. Alongside or as a result of the overload I can't even

remember where I've put my keys at least twice a day.

Secondly local community information, which is an area I work in daily, is intrinsically difficult to capture adequately in any database format. An obvious problem is that situations and community organisations change so rapidly that records cannot ever be maintained with accuracy and kept up to date. In Newham thanks to our local council Social Services and the very good cross sectoral collaboration that has been established we have a community database that is second to none, available on line, on disk and on paper. Proper information collection and updating is extremely labour intensive and is typically under resourced so a partnership approach has proved invaluable. The organisation I work for had responsibility for collecting two major sections, provision for young people (over 350 services) and religion. There were about 250 churches, mosques, temples and religious organisations documented in our directory database of 1994. We are currently reviewing it and this time we have sent out questionnaires to 380 groups.

We began fieldwork in March 1998, we have just over 150 replies by the end of October. It will take the rest of the year to get the data sorted and input, and by then the scene will have changed again. Its like the proverbial painting of the Forth Bridge. In addition there is a problem about marketing and take up of the database. Certainly few community groups know of its existence or make use of it. Many local authorities are imprisoned in a culture of secrecy and departmental turf wars. Such factors can ensure that individual social workers or local schools remain unaware of an excellent local resource.

IT can make this type of

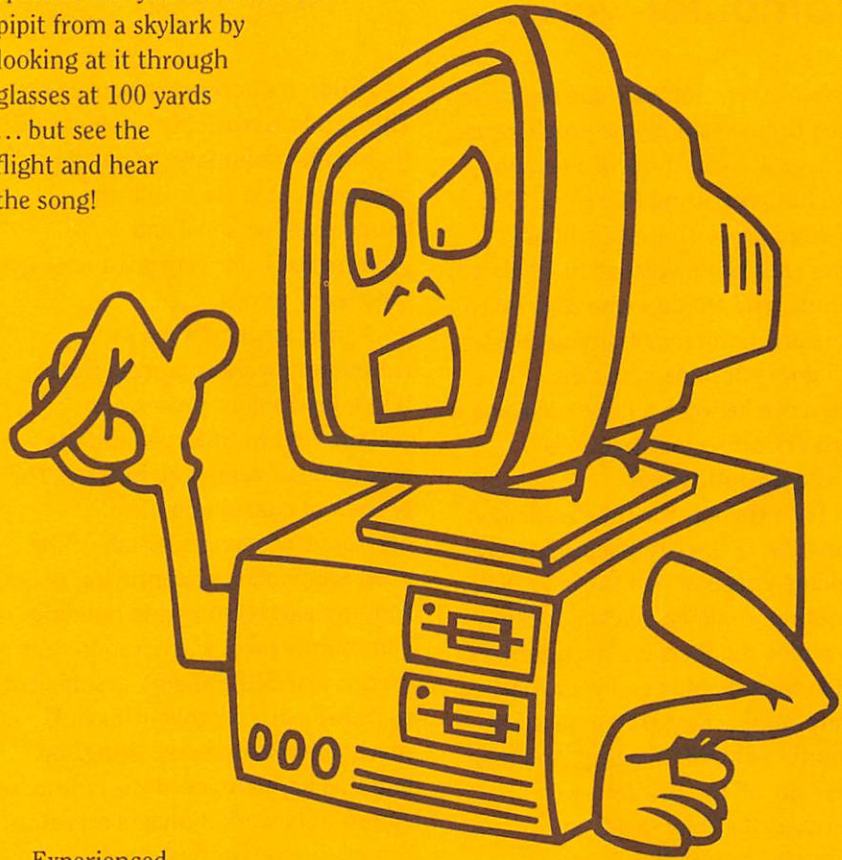


information base possible, indeed in a sense it drives it, and a database if centrally stored and adequately updated is a great improvement in some ways over a paper directory and it can save time in stuffing envelopes and searching for contacts. At least it is unlikely to get lost behind the filing cabinet as some dog-eared volumes do. However, in grass roots community work one can continue to ask if such a database is necessary, useful or relevant.

Many agencies, especially community groups, do not even have the time or capacity to access such a database. They are unlikely to need all that data; a list of twenty names, addresses and telephone numbers for their members and other key stakeholders is often sufficient. A handwritten photocopied sheet sellotaped in everyone's diary or pinned on the wall may be all the information technology they need or, if you like, the technology a small personal organiser or filofax. The temptation of the comprehensive database is to produce inappropriate mass mailshots... which waste time, paper and money. Why invite 1000 community groups to a meeting when you know that phone calls to ten people will draw in a predictable audience of thirty people, and if the issue is a particularly important one the local press and grapevine can do its work more effectively.

Finally there is the question of structure of the database and the difficulty of matching the structure of local knowledge. Given the diversity of the sector it is extremely difficult to fit all community groups and services into straightforward categories. Keyword searches in a database may not produce the most appropriate sub-set of records and you still won't necessarily know what each group is really about. Bird-watchers talk about 'jizz', the certain overall feel by which you identify a

species. Can you tell a meadow pipit from a skylark by looking at it through glasses at 100 yards ... but see the flight and hear the song!



Experienced community practitioners especially if they are locally resident develop the art of jizz over time and find it invaluable. They also carry with them a wealth of relational or network information. Intimate knowledge based on networking covers such areas as who gets on with whom, who used to work for which organisation, and why the director of one local organisation has the ear of the chair of social services.

Gossip is among the most precious information in community work. Such material is both too sensitive and too complex to store on computer even with the technology of complex relational databases. For the average lay person they are far too complex to understand let alone construct, and in any case what a competent community worker carries in her head is a highly sophisticated relationship database.

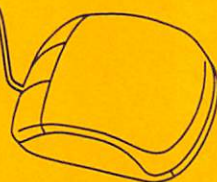
4 Time and process

There is a crazy irony about the measurement of time in IT. Intel invests millions to make processors that work in microseconds rather than milliseconds. But in the voluntary sector no one seems to calculate the waste of time attributable to computers, which increases in direct proportion to the power, speed and complexity of the hardware. First there is the loss of valuable time in the installation process, planning, specifying, ordering, testing takes ages and only then troubleshooting begins. Then someone remembers staff or volunteers need training in the new systems. Again that takes time and after the training there is time taken getting up to speed. In some situations by the time skills are adequate, the volunteer has moved on, the funding has expired or Microsoft has launched its new round

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of obsolescent software and the cycle must begin again. Some people never manage it; I can think of a person who has been using PCs since 1991 for word processing and still only types with two fingers at 10 words a minute, and another who after seven years and numerous training courses still does not understand the difference between a floppy disk and a hard drive directory tree so is constantly losing files.

Then there is the time wasted on using the IT system inappropriately, sending emails across the office when shouting would be quicker, looking up phone numbers via the internet when they should be in your filofax, using complicated DTP to produce minutes of a staff meeting. And then there are all the frivolous web searches, the time spend on computer games, the



printing out of your

children's homework, and so on. This can be a particular problem for the smaller voluntary group where management is slack and the boundary of personal and professional is for very good reasons not clearly drawn.

A final aspect of time in community work is process time. While Intel micro-processors measure micro time, community development cannot be hurried. The process of consultation and development matters. Establishing good relationships, identifying issues, forming partnerships and building community takes a generation. Not even 7-year SRB funding is sufficient to transform a neighbourhood. IT inevitably tries to speed things up and this has permeated the culture of community work. Funders expect us to measure quarterly outputs,

community workers

complain of bureaucracy and the effort to improve general quality of life is overwhelmed by statistical stress and the pace of change.

4 Resources, funding and the law

IT costs money... obviously the hardware and software are expensive though for funded groups with staff this is not necessarily a high percentage of budget. However the industry by promoting products on the basis of technological potential rather than established need for applications makes sure the cost recurs long before the original hardware wears out. Some organisations are made to feel second class by relying on gifts of out of date machines from the business sector, but then find they are more than sufficient for their basic IT tasks of word processing and keeping accounts.

On the other hand many smaller community groups find it easy to get a capital grant for new hardware which they then struggle to use to its proper potential. Too often in the community sector the cost of training, the learning curve and the labour intensive business of maintaining information is not usually costed in planning, and often turns out to be immense.

Other costs and risks are found below the bottom line of the annual accounts. There are costs and risks in terms of health and safety, as well as the stress induced by the rapid rate of unnecessary change and productivity demands. Badly managed change in an organisation can lead to the breakdown of trust between people. Backup systems and fallback strategies are needed because of the risk of paralysis of the organisation when the system goes down as it will. There are legal implications too such as potential lawsuits from holding or disseminating false information.



5 Equality pluralism control, participation and power

Despite talk of electronic democracy of the leveling of hierarchies possible through cyber networks the reality is that IT is creating new elites and growing inequality. While community IT projects may scrape up some crumbs from under BT's table and prevent the total exclusion of a few people living at the margins, the people who are likely to benefit most from IT are those with reserves of capital (economic, cultural and social). To enter the starting gate you need at least to be employed or studying, to be fluent and literate in English and it helps to be young and probably male. Voluntary and community agencies need to consider carefully how their values in favour of social inclusion may be contradicted by their IT policies and practice. And it is likely, too, that IT competition within the sector will also favour the big boys in the national voluntary sector corporations at the expense of the local tenants' group.

IT pundits often argue that cyberspace allows a new diversity of cultural expression, a new pluralism of information channels. Perhaps there is some truth in it, at least we don't all have to be couch potatoes watching exactly the same TV show every night. Yet there are global homogenising tendencies too. All round the world everyone is using Windows 95 or 98, and a limited range of standard search engines on the web. In the quantification of data now required by funders, IT demands standard answers and categories, 'objectively' measurable outputs and outcomes, which take little notice of context, process or quality of service (or when they do, tend to reduce it to statistical performance indicators). This may lead to a culture of lying or

massaging statistics in the chase after the next funding round. This should be anathema to the voluntary charitable and community sector and undermines some of the fundamental values of community work. For example it is plausible to suggest that IT is detrimental to participation and empowerment which are still key values of our sector. Cybernetics after all is the science of control, and IT is often a weapon of management in trying to get their will imposed in an organisation. Rarely is an IT system installed on the basis that staff, still less users, have said they need it to perform particular tasks. Usually the architecture of networked information systems centralises control near the top of the hierarchy. And if it doesn't then control of the organisation will slip to one or two cyber-literate people who ensure they are located at nodal points in the information network.

The basic point in favour of democracy is that powerful people cannot be trusted. They need to be called to account by collective participation, alternative organisation in civil society etc. With cyber networks these powerful nodes and clusters in the network are more shadowy and hidden, all image and spin, less personal, more anonymous and therefore harder to challenge and less accountable. As IT continues to pull people into private interaction which is primarily focused on a machine, the likelihood is that less people will participate in public life less often. That is particularly bad news

for the ordinary person in the street and for those who struggle against social exclusion.

Conclusions

Information technology is here to stay and community workers like other professions, and all citizens of the new millennium need to come to terms with it and use it well. There are several tasks for which information technology is appropriate and is becoming essential and can, if managed thoughtfully, make our work more efficient and effective.

Word processing, keeping computerised accounts and small personal databases are now taken for granted in many walks of life and are useful to most community workers and community groups.

Email can have a positive role in partnership working at a distance and the Web is a useful repository of easily accessible specialist information.

The danger areas are:

- being conned by the techno hype
- neglecting the local personal



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- networks and the human scale of effective communication
- poor information selection skills in a whirl of information overload
- using computers for inappropriate purposes
- neglecting the long term processes of development
- bad management of technological innovation in an organisation
- not counting the cost of training and information gathering
- trying to standardise uniqueness
- the emergence of new hidden elites and hierarchies

The challenge is whether communities, especially those in deprived urban areas in the West, and those in less developed nations around the globe can be included in the information revolution. Can they be included in collective and co-operative ways or is the technology inevitably individualistic. Finally, can we as community workers who control the technology, find in it some useful tools for liberation or are

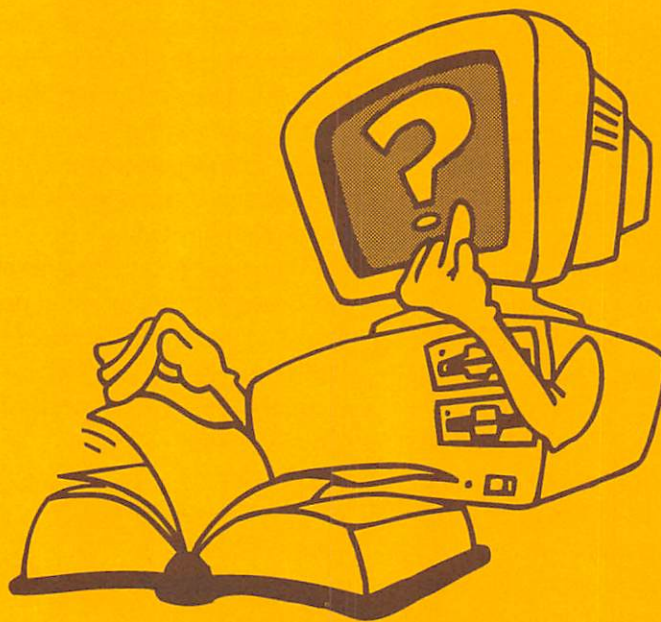
we and the whole global society

coming under IT's control? So if we are seriously committed to community work and cannot find a progressive way to address these challenges my advice is this. Put your PC and especially your

networked systems into the recycle bin... Or at the very least discover the off switch (carefully closing down all your applications first), switch the machine off and go get a life.



- You can contact Greg Smith at CREDO, Mayflower Centre, Vincent Street, London E16 1LZ Tel 0171 474 2255 Email Greg3@xena.uel.ac.uk
- Check out CREDO's website: <http://www.newtel.org.uk/orgs/credo/credo.html>



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What has IT done to community work?

- uprooted us from locality
- drawn community workers away from people
- demanded quantifiable outputs with standardised bureaucratic categories
- cost far more than we budgeted
- wasted precious time
- devalued process
- reduced quality of community knowledge
- increased inequality
- centralised power.

