R U R A L
Connections

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Exploring the Concept of Community Self-Discovery

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A report I heard on public radio a few years ago started my thinking along the lines that are presented here. Because I did not jot it down at the time, I lost track of the Maine town or city that was involved. Readers who may have heard the report are invited to help refresh my memory.

Wherever it was, the situation was this: the town was beginning a planning project, and began by assembling all of the previous studies that they could find - the total was over 300! I do not know how the story turned out, but many questions related to community access and use of available information could be asked at this point. The question this left me with was this: how can I as an individual, or we as community members, learn about ourselves through uncovering what is already known about us by others?

I suspect that what others know about us, or think they know, may be much more important than what we are able to say about ourselves. This points toward an outward-looking strategy of information gathering and interpretation that is at the center of what I call "community self-discovery."

Another example may help to make this more clear. Last year a regional group had been meeting for several months exploring economic development, telecommunications services, and the building of what might be called community social capacity. The topic of web sites came up: "How can we get the message out to the world about who we are? We should get good web pages running?"

True enough. How to provide effective publicity and factual local data to the wider world is a legitimate problem. But even as they were speaking, a national retail chain was busy dismantling historic structures in three of the region's towns, making a significant impact on community character and business patterns. That firm was not waiting to be invited by the region's web sites.

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This example is not presented in a "should or shouldn't" framework. Instead it is meant to show that in some ways what others, outside our communities, already know (imperfect as that knowledge is) may have more importance than what community leaders may be able to assert about themselves, even after significant local fact-finding.

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The search for a solution may be analogous to the insight that we as individuals learn most about ourselves, even find our most authentic being, "through the eyes of the other." This knowledge often does not come easily.

There is a growing awareness that the communities we care about are embedded in large-scale frameworks that originate and end in distant places. This is part of globalization, now underway for at least a hundred years.

A living example in our region is the call for an East-West Highway, promoted partly to meet the requirements and potential opportunities of NAFTA. The debate over this may lead to transportation improvements that are appropriate for the next century. The highway issue is just one of among many new infrastructure projects: the natural gas pipeline, the turnpike widening, Internet to the schools.

Beyond physical infrastructure, major institutional structures are changing. Witness, for instance, deregulation (privatization) of the communications and electricity public service companies. Advocates claim these are bringing benefits to rural Maine, and in many ways they are. On the other hand, infrastructure changes often arrive with unwanted local consequences that might have been mitigated through timely and constructive involvement of a wider public in the process underway.

Statewide implementation of E-911 comes to mind. This is basically a public information and communications infrastructure project, designed to accommodate all legitimate public concerns and requirements. The concept and initial funding were approved in a 1987 referendum, so we collectively "asked for it." Which is often asserted by the implementation teams, when problems are brought to their attention.

Community Self-Discovery

For the past several years, there have been regular news reports about troubling local conflicts over new addresses, road names and even town names.

Recall the disputes between Lille the village and Grand Isle the town, and the tale of two Woodlands. In 1998 a two year battle ensued over a road in the town of Ripley by naming it Controversy Way! Have these disputes been healthy in the long run, or should they have been avoided?

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In some cases, the parties may have been itching for a fight. In others, community identities may have grown stronger. But overall it seems that local needs were not adequately accommodated within the E-911 information system design, and that conflicts have been spin-off effects of what seem to be system design flaws. Discussion of communities must always be imprecise. While communities are often defined geographically, this may be of decreasing importance in the online world.

Communities of interest must be considered along with geographic communities. The diverse nature of communities, often expressed through a common language but not a shared philosophy, puts communities of all sorts at a relative disadvantage within our social structure, increasingly dependent on formal data descriptions and legal definitions.

Are communities as social units likely to be left out in the cold? Other social factors, such as individuals, corporations and governmental jurisdictions may have certain advantages over communities when public issues are at stake. On the other hand, the lack of clarity about any community's exact boundaries may be a source of long term strength.

Return to the E-911 example. Maine's towns, famous for their exercise of local control, were forced to face this issue "alone together." No cross-linking information sharing (problem solving) networks sprang up around this issue through which towns could learn hard-earned lessons from each other. Information from the top was often self-contradictory, beginning with the three different versions of addressing guidelines that were published and ending with the unclear lines of responsibility for this project that seemed to shift between towns, state public safety officials and the U.S. Postal Service.

Yet these alone-together situations of common interest may be helped through advances in universal access to communications technologies. New sharing networks have the potential to redefine who knows what, and how to act on what is already known, but often unheard or ignored. I have no doubt that information technologies are leading us into a new kind of society, encompassing not only a new economics but a new political process.

At the heart of these changes are the rules of access to knowledge: who creates and validates it and who shares in it. The concept of access, including debates about the information-rich and poor, ultimately boils down to the question of who is included and who is excluded from participation in public dialogue. The instruments for defining new rules (or expectations) of inclusion, and for ensuring that the new rules are fair to all, are now in all of our hands.

In terms of information systems, broadly conceived, three principles ought to be central to new rules of access and expectations of inclusion. First, I ought to have access to what others know about me and my community, to our representations in their databases. Next, there should be full disclosure about how this information is main-tained and related to other information structures, including the actual practices of public data sharing and corporate data sales. Third, every person, community, jurisdiction and organization has a right to hold on to its own representation of the world, wrong as it may be in the judgement of others.

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Who can be expected to exercise leadership in crafting the rules of inclusion that are appropriate in an online age? In the future as in the past we will rely on individuals who already are community leaders in town halls, schools, libraries, and issue-oriented civic advocacy groups. The existence of a healthy locally-controlled press will continue to be important. To these we must add a cadre of public spirited technology professionals and enthusiasts who are willing to share their competence with the community at large.

Community self-discovery is a transition concept, a concept without a definition, which is all to the good. It marks the transition between community self-defense, on one hand, and community self-determination (and development) on the other. It suggests an outward-looking strategy that depends on actively seeking to know what others are about, and on deciding what that means for ourselves. It acknowledges that information is always incomplete, and requires the creation of channels to share even the small portion that each one of us knows. The absence of a precise definition allows each community, whether geographic or interest based, space to learn and grow. ∎