

Winning ways: online regional communities that click.

Ian Knox

Centre for Regional Innovation and Competitiveness,
University of Ballarat

Abstract

Significant resources have been allocated to regional and rural communities in Australia to provide information technology and connectivity infrastructure. A sense of community was traditionally provided by the local primary school, church, or tennis club. As many of these facilities are no longer available, the Internet is seen as an opportunity to foster community activities, interests and events. Although significant funding has been provided to support the establishment of online communities, websites and regional web portals, many projects fail or stall once the initial funding has been expended. In terms of ongoing sustainability, it is rare to find examples of life after funding as most initiatives fail to develop sufficient revenue streams or systems that can support the project staff, content maintenance, and infrastructure beyond the seed-funded period.

This paper examines factors which contribute to the success of Australian community web sites. It seems the level of seed funding provided to establish sites is not as important as other less tangible features such as the degree of community ownership, the ability for multiple users to contribute, local relevance, and levels of interactivity. The study confirms that technology can play a useful role in bringing communities closer together, but ultimately it is the people that make up a community, not the technology.

Introduction

In recent years resources have been allocated to regional and rural communities in Australia to provide information technology and connectivity infrastructure. Much discussion of the introduction of information and communications technology (ICT) is concerned with technological and supply side issues. In recent years the up-take and use of such technologies has become an increasingly important area of social enquiry (Baum, Gellecum and Yigitcanlar, 2004). The dominant trends surrounding the extension of ICTs are not socially, geographically or culturally neutral (Graham, 2002). The impact of the Internet for news, political and civic engagement is well recognised, and policy options for reducing the digital divide are often suggested (Norris 2001).

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The focus of this research is not the digital divide; it is rather how to engage and encourage community members to use ICT when it is available. Graham (2002) suggests that too often municipal and local government websites are little more than 'government shops' which simply 'broadcast' information about services to consumers.

Funding has been provided to support the establishment of online communities, websites and regional web portals by such bodies as the Australian National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE). The functions of this body have since been replaced by the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) in April 2004. State and local government authorities have also provided project funding. This raises the question 'is there life after funding?' Can communities use ICT to enhance local communications needs? Communications are and always have been people centric. This study confirms that technology can play a useful role in bringing communities closer together, but ultimately it is the people that make up a community, not the technology. The Internet provides a useful opportunity as a focus to highlight community activities, interests and events. It may encourage the strengthening of local relationships. Regional and rural success has been linked to the degree to which businesses and communities gain access to ICT (Black, Duff et al., 2000; Garlick, 2000; Keller, 2000; Papandrea & Wade, 2000). As with any new technology there are detractors. Talbott (1995: 74) expresses a pessimistic view 'community is, in the first instance, something to be salvaged from information technology, not furthered by it'. Doheny-Farina (1996: 123) writes that 'the Internet in connecting everyone furthers our isolation by abstracting us from place and visualising human relations'.

The Internet is still a very new technology and mass adoption has only taken off in the last few years (since about 2000). The 'flat earth' views such as expressed by Talbott and Doheny-Farina seem less relevant today than in the 1990s. Such uses as financial services, travel (information and airline ticket purchases) and email (by far the main use of the Internet) have become commonplace. Increasingly, the Internet is becoming the only way to access services, so use is no longer optional. All high school students applying for university places in Victoria must do so online. There is no longer a paper-based option. In addition to a digital divide, it could also be argued that there is also a 'digital malaise'. It has been suggested that people or community groups are often forced into imposed and standardised 'top-down' models neglecting the huge diversity of communicational cultures between them (Shanmugavelan, 2000). Do small communities actually want to use ICT for local communications purposes?

Method

In Australia a community focus was once provided by organisations such as the local primary school, church, or tennis club. As many of these facilities are no longer available, the Internet is seen as an opportunity to foster community activities, interests and events.

The technical aim of the project was to promote the use of information communication technology by individual members of small regional, rural and micro communities throughout Australia. Essentially though, the project was about the loss of 'meeting place', and the role ICT could play to alleviate such loss.

A multi-faceted approach was adopted. It included reviewing existing community web sites, establishing a number of demonstration sites and producing a 'community web-developers handbook'. Funding was provided by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation. Three demonstration sites were constructed and the different aspects of each will be discussed in this paper. It is expected that lessons learned would also have implications for communities with similar needs at other geographical locations.

Over 100 Australian rural and regional community web pages were examined, and compared in terms of the level of community involvement they appeared to attract. In some of the cases, community members were interviewed, but others were found by extensive web searching and observations are made from a ‘visitors’ point of view. The community pages were assessed subjectively, but the exercise identified likely key elements of successful community pages, which could then be tested in the demonstration sites.

Online communities

When reviewing community sites, it was not intended to pick winners and losers, but rather to investigate the diversity of communities online. Sites were examined and compared in terms of the level of community involvement they appeared to attract. Of particular interest was any feature that would encourage a user to return to a page once visited. This was called a ‘Why Come Back’ factor (WCB).

One of the main characteristics of the Internet that differentiates it from other media is interactivity. It was found to be the key to a vibrant community, and it was often neglected or excluded altogether. The strength of ‘Networks’, however they are organised, are well understood to be key indicators of community vitality. This vitality also needs to be generated by Internet use and connectivity. Without a facility for interactivity, sites tend to be little more than electronic brochures. Interactivity allows two-way communication with visitors and may include such uses as email, hyperlinks, online forms, surveys, guest books, and chat rooms. High budget sites that appear to attract regular traffic also offer additional features such as free email accounts, or personal web pages. Additional features can be installed for minimal extra expense. A large variety of web-based tools are available, often free (but advertising supported). Table 1 lists examples of free tool sets available from Canadian Internet service provider Bravenet <www.bravenet.com> .

Table 1: Bravenet Services - Free Tools Available

- Guest books	- Vote casters
- Message forums	- Site search
- Affiliate program	- Live person
- Hit counters/site stats	- Hosting and domains
- Mini polls	- Free audio clips
- Mailing lists	- Free fonts
- Email forums	- Articles and tutorials
- Guest maps	- Java scripts
- Chat rooms	- Free clip art
- E-cards	- Quick references
- Classified ads	- Site rings
- Tell-a-friend	- Daily cartoons
- Fast URL-redirects	- Calendar
- FAQ’s	- Web journal/blog
- Links listing	- Web templates
- Budget ad campaigns	- Traffic exchange
- Password protection	- Photo albums
- Webmaster resources	- Mini tools

All of the features listed are available free, but they do have banner ads and some pop-ups associated. As with all free sites, ads can be removed and additional features and

functionality included for a fee. Many other Internet service providers also offer free services, ranging from hosting web pages, to various ranges of free tool sets similar to those listed in table 1. Some free web pages are also advertisement free, but a decision was made for this project to use commercial hosting for all of the demonstration sites to ensure the same degree of control over publication and display properties.

When reviewing web pages at the small or micro-community level they were found to vary a lot in terms of content, design, functionality and style. Pages range from the very simple to the very complex, but it was found that many simple pages also had a high level of participation, and sense of local ownership.

The Muttaborra Community page <<http://www.muttaborra.com/home.php>> is a very good example of the work children at the local school have contributed.

‘The Muttaborra Community welcomes you to the geographical centre of Queensland. We hope you stay awhile and look around to learn about our past, present and future’.

The Mt Evelyn Community page <<http://www.mt-evelyn.net>> has virtually no graphics at all, and yet it is obviously very popular. The forum is active and there are hundreds of views recorded on some topics such as ‘is Mt Evelyn Dry?’ (20 comments, 432 views) or ‘Morrison on the Park’, (36 comments, 586 views).

A majority of regional and rural municipalities have a significant web presence. Many act as a portal promoting the whole region at one level, and they may then provide links to individual towns and other interest groups such as sporting clubs throughout the region. Many large portals tend to be fairly rigid, and have high development costs (examples ranged up to several million dollars). It is not the intention of this paper to debate whether that is a good or a bad thing, but rather to note that it is a common and recurring observation of portals. It was the initial intention of the researcher to review web pages only, but during the course of the review it became clear that web pages may not always be the most appropriate communications model for all communities. For small groups email lists were found to be sufficient. Others used groups, Wiki pages and increasingly Blog pages. No one method tended to be exclusive and usually a combination was used. As online communities become more active it was usual to have a web page as an entrance that then also incorporated other features such as a Blog or group because of their ease of use and suitability for a high level of interactivity. While some budget to develop a community Internet strategy is necessary, it was found that success was not solely budget related because of the wide variety of low cost options that are available. This statement was also tested and found to be true of the demonstration sites, described in the next section.

Developing the demonstration sites

Three demonstration sites were constructed, and the process and outcomes were recorded. Two of the sites were produced in consultation with community members in the Moorabool and Golden Plains Shires of Victoria, and one was developed for a local club. The sites were developed for the communities of Mt Egerton and Mt Mercer Road, and a site was developed for Ballarat Pony Club. The Mt Egerton site was professionally developed at full commercial rates, while the other sites were developed for minimal cost.

Mt Egerton (Victoria)

The Moorabool Shire Council is committed to increasing its online capacity and to achieving more effective utilisation of information communications technology (ICT) across the broader community. A number of initiatives have been undertaken so that more people gain

confidence and skills using the Internet and online services. McOnline (www.mconline.com.au) the Moorabool shire portal was established and progressively enhanced as one means of supporting the uptake and ongoing advancement of online services in the region. Notices and events could be posted on McOnline for towns in the region, but towns did not have their own web sites.

The Mt Egerton community secured funding towards the establishment of a local community web site. Moorabool shire recommended, and the Mt Egerton Community Development Group agreed, that the web site would be developed within the McOnline community portal infrastructure. The University of Ballarat Centre for Electronic Commerce developed the web site framework which incorporated functionality similar to McOnline (business and community directories, news, events, web links and resources). Content added to MtEgerton.com, is also accessible through McOnline. For example, Mt Egerton businesses and events are accessible through both McOnline and MtEgerton.com. Broader promotion of information is also achieved through the MainStreet regional portal (www.mainstreet.net.au). The major project participants included: the Mt Egerton Community Development Group, the Centre for Electronic Commerce and Communications, the MtEgerton.com working party, the Moorabool Shire Council, the Ballan and District CCBI and the University of Ballarat (through the involvement of this project).

The MtEgerton.com web site also incorporates some additional features to meet local needs. These will include online classifieds, a community skills/assets register and a games section (which will include links and discussion capabilities) to engage young people in the Mt Egerton community. The project cost was about \$8000 with an ongoing hosting and support charge of \$500 per year. Because much of existing MC Online infrastructure was utilised in the project, the costings were considered to be conservative.

Although Mt Egerton has its own URL (www.mtegerton.com), it is also a part of the McOnline portal and it can be accessed either directly, or through the MCO page. The look and feel of Mt Egerton is similar to the look and feel of MCO. A number of 'mock up' design pages were submitted to the Mt Egerton committee for feedback, before a design was chosen. Additional features included for the local level include a business directory, free classifieds and an online games section. Current events, news items and discussion are shared across the MCO portal. An examination of some of the features would indicate that they are not being heavily utilised at this stage. MtEgerton.com has a professional appearance, and a good variety of features. The page has been online for over a year and to date it has not exhibited a high level of use.

Mt Mercer Road

In contrast to the Mt Egerton page (which involved wide community consultation, detailed planning and resourcing), Mt Mercer Road did not have a formal planning process or a budget. While no formal planning took place, there was a planning process of sorts, and there was certainly consultation, initially as an 'add-on' agenda item for the Golden Plains Shire Community Advisory Group Facilitators meeting. Because the Golden Plains Shire spans a large area with few major population centres, the shire used community facilitators to help the small communities throughout the region develop their own community plans. Initiatives have included such things as support for grants to improve the local hall facilities, and to organise social events and activities. This initiative was very well received, and many groups still meet regularly to discuss progress. It was at one such meeting that the proposed Mt Mercer Road web page was discussed and a site map was constructed on a drinks coaster at the Buninyong Hotel. Telephone calls were made around the district to canvas potential URLs for the site. Mtmercerroad.com was chosen. A local photographer provided some

photos for the front page. Mt Mercer road is as its name implies, just a road that spans 20 kilometres from Buninyong (near Ballarat to Mt Mercer). Two small towns, Grenville and Garribaldi are along its length. Both towns have a hall, and a few houses, but there are many more houses around the general district. The only thing that most residents have in common is that they all commute daily on the Mt Mercer Road.

It was estimated that about half of the local residents had Internet connections (anecdotal evidence and a survey of school bus commuters). Although the Internet is now well established, many people have little or no experience and what a web developer considers obvious may not be to others. In the case of Mt Mercer Road, the original entry page said 'Welcome to Mt Mercer Road. Please Enter'. Within a day a telephone call was received from a local who said the page was great but 'is that all there is?' The lessons from this were twofold. Firstly, links are not necessarily understood and need to be spelt out as in 'click here'. Secondly, it goes to show that people really do look and mistakes are picked up quickly indeed! Perhaps the question should be asked 'Should an entry page be used at all, or would it be better to go straight onto a home page?' There is no right or wrong answer to this, and many people commented that they liked the feeling of connectedness they felt viewing the entry page. Improving the clarity of the text seemed to fix the situation.

The original home page explained the project, and invited comments and suggestions. A wiki page (a free-for-all page that allows comments to be posted from anyone) was used for this purpose and was very popular. A letterbox drop was used to alert people throughout the district to have a look. Within a few weeks, the home page included community news and the project details. Initially the page was hosted on a free site, but it was decided to pay a hosting fee to remove banner and popup advertisements. The total cost of hosting and domain name registration for 12 months was US\$80 and this was the only expense incurred in the project, other than volunteers' time. Some of the features on the page include links to the weather, the ABC Radio Country Hour and the local movies. Simple features, such as the date, were also easy to include. The Grenville-Garibaldi newsletter is produced quarterly and it is converted to a PDF format and available online. Making the newsletter available electronically has increased its reach, particularly as distributions of the paper version is done by volunteers and is a bit 'hit and miss'. Feedback has also been very enthusiastic, as the online version is in colour. The Mt Mercer Road page has proven popular and is continuing to receive regular visits.

Ballarat Pony Club

In the previous two demonstration projects, users had geographic locality in common. With this comes diversity of interests and to an extent, a lack of common commitment. The Ballarat Pony club project on the other hand, provided an opportunity to develop a site for a community that had a common interest, although members are geographically dispersed throughout the region. The project was first suggested in 2002 but after several meetings it was put on hold because of the privacy concerns of some committee members. In August 2004, the issue was raised again. An informal meeting was held and an initial page was developed over a two-week period. This ad hoc approach, can work well for simple pages; for complex pages (such as Mt Egerton) that are heavily programmed and template driven, changes are much more difficult to make once a template design is agreed. For pages that employ simple construction techniques, 'build first, ask questions later' gives a chance for less Internet literate members to comment on something they can see and use. Getting volunteer committee members together is never easy and this was no exception. Various URLs were posted for comment, and ballaratponyclub.com was chosen. When there is doubt, using a full title seems to work well as it is easy for members to remember.

When deciding what features to include in the site, the Why Come Back Factor (WCB) was considered to be extremely important. Incorporating the monthly newsletter provided a unique WCB opportunity. In the case of BPC, a decision was made to drop the print version of the newsletter immediately unless people requested it (opt in). This was very successful, with only a few families requesting a print version. In the near future, a levy will be charged for a print version to be posted. The newsletter also contains the timetable for the next rally, and as children like to know in advance what groups they are in, it is an added incentive. Other features of the page include an event calendar, competition information and entry forms, a forum, general links page, links to the Pony Club Association and the regional zone, a photo page and a free classified ads page. The classified advertisements are open to anyone, and at the time of writing over 100 horses were advertised for sale on the site. Listings are posted from BPC members but also from interested people throughout Australia.

In a very short period of time, the BPC page has become integral to the operation of the club. It is particularly useful for sharing information (such as the newsletter or entry forms) and for receiving members' feedback. However, issues still arise that need to be addressed and creative solutions need to be found. In the past, the BPC newsletter was produced and collated by a volunteer editor. Since it has gone online people have started to send in bits and pieces, and that has created its own problems. It had been assumed (incorrectly) that a completed newsletter would be emailed (to the web manager) for publication to the web. It was intended that this document would be converted to a PDF format and published by file transfer protocol (FTP) within seconds. The reality was that individual pages, photos, forms, and other files were sent randomly creating a collage of files in different fonts, styles, colours, file sizes and file types. An answer to this minor (but still problematic) dilemma was found by publishing a blog page, that individuals can publish to easily and directly themselves. The use of the blog page was very successful, because of its ease of use (Barger, 1999 and Hourihan, Meg 2002) and ready access on any computer connected to the Internet. On one occasion a report was filed on the blog by the DC (District Commissioner) from an overseas Internet café. The need for passwords has been avoided throughout the site, and with the exception of the blog and the web page, all of the interactive features (classifieds, calendar, forum, chat, links) can be added to by anyone. It is possible to password protect any or all of the site features but to date it has not been necessary. By allowing members to post their own content they have reported feeling a sense of satisfaction, achievement and delight at seeing their words instantly published.

Ongoing sustainability

The web is littered with community web pages that obviously have not been updated in a long time. There can be many reasons for stagnation, but often it is because the individual who was driving the project has lost interest, moved from the district, had a fight with the neighbours (more common than might be imagined) or become too busy with other things. Safeguarding the future of a page is best done by having as many people involved as possible at all times. That is the major benefit of calendars, classified advertisements, wikis and other features that are easily managed by individual users themselves. Getting children involved was also found to be a good way to generate activity and interest. Every painting posted by a five year old community member will attract viewings by mum, dad, gran, brothers, sisters, and friends. Photos are the same, and galleries should be encouraged. Local news and announcements are also important, but it is not always possible to update them constantly, so a newsletter every quarter is a good compromise, combined with random updates. Currency can be achieved in other ways, by using features such as event calendars, or links to other pages (such as movies, radio, weather).

It is usual to seek out people with talents in the community so they can be shared (or exploited). Many projects start this way, and time is often willingly donated. After a while it may become a chore, particularly if it is the person's occupation as well, rather than an interest. In the case of web site development and ongoing content management, it is a good idea to seek a 'project champion'. In this case the most experienced person may not be the most suitable. The most essential quality in a 'project champion' is enthusiasm (and in this case a computer, Internet access, and at least word processing skills). There is no convert like a new convert. By providing a little training and support, web management will be easy, and it is a good way to encourage and strengthen friendship in the area.

When projects have resulted from seeding grants, life after funding is often elusive. Committees wear out, particularly volunteers. Where is the \$500 or \$1000 a year for hosting and technical support going to come from? Sporting clubs or other groups that have membership fees may be able to justify and afford the charges, but in many communities, raising funds is a battle. Just paying community hall rates, services and public liability insurance has become a major fundraising activity. If ongoing funding is likely to be an issue, low-cost options should be investigated from the outset.

Measures of success

Unlike commercial web sites, success cannot be measured in financial terms. Suffice to say that if a site is well used, it has a measure of success. Some recurring themes have emerged from reviewing many of the sites included in this study. The following WCB check list is offered as a guide. It is not exhaustive but provides a good starting point for assessing a community site.

Why Come Back?

Does the page cater to personal interests? Y/N

Is there dynamic change? Y/N

Is the site fun? Y/N

Are contacts listed for ready reference? Y/N

Is current, useful, information provided? Y/N

Is there good (non-malicious) gossip? Y/N

Are there interactive features? Y/N

Is there a high degree of local ownership? Y/N

Can multiple users contribute? Y/N

Are web-based applications that increase functionality provided? Y/N

Has social interaction in the physical community increased as a result of online interaction?
Y/N

There is no scoring system and no right or wrong answers. However, a high proportion of 'yes' answers would suggest an active community exchange is taking place.

Conclusion and discussion

All of the demonstration sites have been online since early 2004. Neither of the community sites exhibits a high level of activity. Mt Egerton, is well maintained, but has had little real content added since its launch. There is a posting on the site inviting community members to contribute and it concedes that interest has dropped. As the fee structure for the construction and maintenance of Mt Egerton involves an ongoing annual fee, community members will need to justify its continued existence. The Mt Mercer Road site faces similar usage issues to Mt Egerton, but it has much lower running and management costs. None of the Mt Mercer Road features are password protected so multiple users post events themselves on a regular basis, making the calendar the most used feature. The links to the weather and the ABC radio

Country Hour also are used on a regular basis, indicating the page is being used as a gateway to other sites rather than users bookmarking them directly.

The Ballarat Pony Club page was immediately popular, and the Internet proved to be an ideal communications medium for a niche interest group. The ongoing hosting costs for the pony club will be easily justified in terms of newsletter printing and postage savings alone. While there is an acknowledged role for the web page design industry, it is clear that community users should determine the level of functionality they require. High cost community web pages may in fact inhibit page utilisation (in the absence of a web master or content manager) as users could be intimidated by an overly sophisticated interface. Although it was the aim of this project to construct three demonstration web pages that were accessible to all community members, it was consistently found that the need to use file transfer protocol (FTP) or even a content management system (Mt Egerton) was a disincentive to participation. In many instances it was noted that the gap between an individual's technical knowledge and their willingness and interest to learn was too great. Although the Internet is seen as a good means to gain information, little interest was expressed by members of any of the communities to learn about the technology. As 'training and education' is a common component of community Internet/connectivity projects, there are implications that the skills needed to participate should be kept to a basic level. Most people could write a letter to the editor of a newspaper, whereas few can actually publish a web page, even a simple one. It is suggested that this is the reason that easy to use tools and resources such as wiki pages, blogs and classified advertisements proved popular as they afford a high degree of ownership, ease of use, and are accessible from any computer that has access to the Internet.

A web page may (and probably should) be used as the launch pad for a community communications strategy. It can provide an easy to remember domain name, contact information for members, general community information and links to sites of interest and to interactive tools and resources. Feedback from participants in this project however, suggests that the user experience is greatly enhanced when a web page strategy also incorporates easy to use web based interactive and self publishing functions. There is an opportunity for further research to further explore the reasons and factors that encourage community members to return to, and use, web based communications.

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