

Editorial: Harnessing ICTs for ethnic community development

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This issue of AENJ is about potential. It's about the way the internet and mobile telecommunications are changing the way our society thinks, links and functions. Access to the information and communication channels available through these networks puts us in a new space, where New Zealand's tyranny of distance is both diminished and amplified. The internet makes globalisation a reality but it magnifies the local and it has enormous potential to connect and support communities, particularly those who are otherwise disadvantaged.

Previous issues of the AEN Journal have focussed on the present and the past. This issue is more about the future. It is about building potential and what might be. We are to some extent fortunate. New Zealand is relatively prosperous, it has one of the highest levels of internet uptake anywhere in the world. Ironically though we have one of the poorest levels of broadband uptake in the OECD, which hints at a potential risk of us falling behind in terms of newer, richer media offerings. As David Cunliffe's article observes, this matters. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)¹ are at the heart of a new information-based economy. They also at the heart of any society that values connection, freedom of access to information, lifelong learning and democracy.

To be connected is, on the whole, an advantage. The internet connects us, yet many people face barriers to effective digital engagement. Access is neither equitable nor ubiquitous and information literacy is far from universal. Manuel Castells argues that the societal transformation brought about by access to information (and the related disadvantage of not having access) is too significant to leave to chance². Information and communication enables

individuals and communities to shape their identities, develop a shared sense of community and to gain insight into other, different communities.

There is a strong correlation between income and access to ICTs in New Zealand (as elsewhere). The urban poor, those living in rural locations and the elderly are more likely to lack internet access at home. You are almost five times more likely to be online if you own your own home and single-parent families have significantly lower levels of internet access compared to families with two parents at home. The good news is that some of our ethnic communities are amongst the highest per capita users of the internet in New Zealand³.

The cover picture (and photo-essay later in this issue) represents one example of the power of communities to grab new technology and to make it work for them. Whangarei's 155 Community House is doing great work locally and across Northland with projects such as their Cyber Whare, digital community television and exploring video links to remote communities.

The Aotearoa Ethnic Network (AEN) demonstrates the

1 This term is used intentionally to include not just computers and the internet but also telephones, mobile networked devices and digital media in its broadest sense.
2 Castells, M. (2000). *The rise of the network society* (2nd ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

3 Ministry of Social Development. (2006). *The social report 2006: Indicators of social wellbeing in New Zealand*. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Social Development.

online interactions have offline consequences and lead to interventions in the wider social and political process.

power of online media. Its email-based list connects over 350 people across the ethnic sector with each other and, through members from the media, reveals otherwise almost invisible points of view to a wider mainstream audience. The AEN Journal is only made possible because of the low cost of online publishing and the increasing availability of internet access; opportunity meets desire. We could not provide over a thousand printed copies each issue for free but that's exactly what we do online!

The latest Census makes it clear that New Zealand's cultural diversity continues to increase⁴. Much of what has been said about ICTs and ethnic communities focuses on the so-called 'digital divide' and on transnational issues of globalisation and migration. There is a tendency to ignore opportunities for new forms of online cultural practice. ICTs make participation easier and this is itself a key enabler for the economic and social integration of ethnic communities⁵.

AEN contests and shapes how racialised ethnic identities are represented in New Zealand's public sphere. The AEN online community and Journal provide a mechanism for exploring and extending the understanding of ethnic identities that transcends divisions between and within groups. AEN connects people who might otherwise have little contact. Such online interactions have offline consequences and lead to interventions in the wider social and political process. This creates what Parker and Song⁶ call "a new self-confidence to mount campaigns against other media and institutions where the terms of representation work against" ethnic communities.

The use of ICTs within community settings is an emerging and contestable field and research is not conclusive on the impact of ICTs on social capital—the measure of connectedness of individuals to each other⁷. Our experience

with AEN suggests a positive correlation and this is backed up by Andy's own research, which shows ICTs increase the social capital of people active in their communities⁸. AEN succeeds in not only helping with bonding capital (resources for ethnic communities that provide a sense of identity and belonging and practical support networks) but also assists with bridging capital where genuine links between diverse ethnic and faith communities are being created.

The European Commission see such linkages as vital for creating integration in multi-cultural societies because links across diverse ethnic communities are weaker and infrequent. Going further, AEN creates linking capital, where individuals are connected more easily to key influencers and decision makers.

What AEN does on a day-to-day level, the New Zealand Digital Strategy⁹ attempts to do at a policy level. This is a whole of government—indeed whole of society—approach to ICTs and is without question world leading. Drawing on work that came out of the UN's World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)¹⁰, it targets government, business and community through the three enablers of connection, content and confidence.

The Digital Strategy unsurprisingly raises its head throughout this issue. It provides a tangible \$400m for ICT-related projects, \$21m of that directly targeted at community-based initiatives and \$24m for broadband, including remote and underserved communities. This is already benefiting our ethnic communities and the second round of funding shows increased applications from the ethnic sector. Our libraries have embraced ICTs and learning centre concepts and other resource centres are springing up across the country. These will soon be better connected and strengthened through the People's Network, our version of the UK-based project of the same name.

4 See www.stats.govt.nz

5 See ipolicy.squarespace.com/ict-for-diversity

6 Parker, D. & Song, M. (2006). New ethnicities online: reflexive racialisation and the internet. *The Sociological Review*. 54:3. 575-594, p.586

7 Gaved, M., & Anderson, B. (2006). *The impact of local ICT initiatives on social capital and quality of life*. Ipswich, UK: Chimera, University of Essex.

8 Williamson, A. (2006, Oct 7-11). Disruptive spaces and transformative praxis: Reclaiming community voices through electronic democracy. Paper presented at the Community Informatics Research Network Conference, Prato, Italy.

9 See www.digitalstrategy.govt.nz

10 See www.wsis.int

Andy has always been a strong supporter of the Digital Strategy—having such a strategy is not optional if we are to turn a digital deficit into a digital dividend. But that doesn't mean we are complacent and we do have concerns that the tripartite model of government, business and civil society tilts strongly in favour of government. The Digital Content Strategy is a case in point, where clearly valuable community initiatives such as the People's Network meet resistance from a technocracy that doesn't understand. We are cautioned by the resistance being shown within government to the Creative Commons framework when failure to grasp this represents digital suicide for parts of our creative sector.

Robyn Kamira observes that both the Digital Strategy and the Digital Content Strategy deftly ignore what is after all the founding document of our sovereign nation, te Tiriti o Waitangi. But how is a digital national identity to be formed if policy makers choose to ignore our history and what makes Aotearoa unique? Sarai Lastra's article links closely with Robyn's. Both explore the world of a minority subsumed into another culture, with no voice on the international stage and controlled by policy and practice devised on the whim of others. For Puerto Rico, this means an inherently Spanish, Caribbean nation is driven by Anglo-middle class US-centric policy and is unable to determine its own economic and social priorities. And for Māori... well, enough said!

Maintaining the Latin American connection, Gilson Schwartz hints at what new networked technologies can do for one the world's most vibrant countries, a thriving economy but one faced with enormous socio-economic disparity. How is a globalised world to benefit the wider local population unless access is available and they are prepared? How do communities become digitally emancipated?

There are some New Zealand community ICT success stories but on whole the sector suffers from a lack of funding, an over reliance on voluntary resources, a lack of skilled people and a lack of strategic alignment with organisational or community needs¹¹. If that sounds critical, research in the US and UK reports the same findings, so we are not alone. Kate Sutton and Richard Pamatatau certainly draw out some of the challenges that we face at the grass-roots if we are to become a digital nation.

So what of blogs then? The latest fashion accessory, they are touted as cheap grass-roots publishing. Keith Ng highlights the undoubted benefits but also acknowledges that they are potentially problematic; they lack the editorial rigour of more formal media. In reality many are little more

than opinionated diatribe, lacking in substance and more intent on pushing the views of the author than enabling dialogue. In a time of crisis we still turn to the mainstream media. But who do you really trust? North and South? Or publications where the focus is advertising revenue before editorial rigour?

Blogs have certainly provided a useful insight in to what is happening amidst the current unrest in Fiji. Given the power of the military in this situation and the atmosphere of fear and repression, it is perhaps only an informal, underground media source that dares to report the truth. And no matter how contestable that truth might be, it is critical that such sources continue.

Andrew Clark takes a look at online telephony and video calling to see how this is changing the communication amongst diasporas. Technology was the catalyst for Laura Packer, Paul Rankin and Robin Hansteen-Izora's work on cultural story-bases. Their innovative work connecting remote indigenous communities simply could not exist without it. It also draws our attention to the way technology is developed and controlled by an elite and as such how it can work against the interests of the marginalised, particularly indigenous communities.

However, let's be really clear: It is not the technology that matters. What matters are the social and communal conditions that ICTs can influence and affect. Good projects, successful projects, privilege the information and the communication ahead of the technology.

In this issue, we've attempted to present a range of perspectives that show the potential for how ICTs can be harnessed by different communities—whether they are communities of place, interest, faith or ethnicity.

This is not a 'show and tell', nor is it a handbook for community technology.

What we hope it will do is energise and inspire, helping ethnic communities generate new collective ideas about the value, function and potential of ICTs. Our hope is that the writing in this issue will inspire and educate, demonstrate some good ideas and help some of us to make fewer mistakes. Above all, we hope it will motivate ethnic communities in Aotearoa to recognise the value of ICTs and seize every opportunity to adopt and use them effectively.

Disclosure: Andy Williamson is Deputy Chair of the New Zealand Government's Digital Strategy Advisory Group however the views expressed in this editorial are his own.

11 Craig, B., & Williamson, A. (2005). Survey of New Zealand community ICT organisations and projects. Wellington, NZ: Victoria University of Wellington/Department of Labour.