

CCIS TELEPORT (EDINBURGH): LIFE ON THE DIGITAL FRONTIER - SUSTAINABLE DIGITAL INCLUSION OR DIGITAL DELUSION? A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Digital networks of distributed electronic intelligence are transforming society at large. The propensity for telematic infrastructures/ computer mediated communications/information communications technologies to absorb communities into a globally networked grid called the Information Society is evident for all to see. However, concern remains that the Internet and its related genus will not engulf us all, equally. The fear remains that the IT have not's and have late's, those already socio-economically excluded, will become further disenfranchised and suffer digital exclusion.

CCIS Teleport (Edinburgh, Scotland), is an award winning, community based ISP and port of quality digital applications and services. Established in January 1994, CCIS has been in the vanguard of the drive to catalyse digitally inclusive programmes for those groups and individuals who would otherwise not be afforded the opportunity to help define, and share in the prosperity of, the Global Information Society.

The presentation will focus upon attempts by CCIS to 'road test' digitally inclusive programmes vis a vis our work with Techno Tots, Keyboard Kids, Digital Dads, Modem Mums, Cyber Grannies.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1933, H G Wells, in his prophetic novel, *The Shape of Things to Come* (Everyman, 1993), speculated on the future pattern of events and things, suggesting that "one day a new race would stand upon the earth as one stands upon a stool and be able to reach out and touch the stars."

It is the case that we can reasonably discern the shape of things to come in terms of predicting how computer software and hardware applications will evolve over the next 20 years, by extrapolating from contemporary IT trends. *Business Week* (June 1997) for example visited the top research labs in the world and predicted the entrenchment of nanobyte technology, life streams, 3D images in space and technological ants. The report moots that PC networks will become ubiquitous with PCs becoming like living creatures.

All good and well, but what *Business Week* and others such as Michio Kaku (*Visions*, Oxford University Press, 1998) ignore is the shape of things to come in terms of the sociological and social implications, opportunities and repercussions associated with such developments. This is an oversight we are addressing in Craigmillar.

Craigmillar is one of Scotland's most socially and economically deprived communities, an area with an abundance of people who are excluded from participation in mainstream society by virtue of ill health, poor housing, low skill levels, low income, unemployment and other such disadvantages such that they are prevented from full participation in socio-economic life.

As we enter the Information Society and Knowledge Economy proper, our economies and social fabric will increasingly be shaped by the world's private and public networks of distributed digital

intelligence. One commonly held fear is that those people with ACCESS to electronic resources and skills who will be able to fully participate in social and commercial life, with those left behind becoming the digital underclass.

In the UK there is a major policy concern to develop governmental policies which obviate against socio-economic exclusion by promoting inclusive policy measures. Last year a major report (3 Nations: Social Exclusion in Scotland, James McCormick and Graham Leicester, The Scottish Council Foundation, 1998) argued that Scotland is divided into three nations by long running socio-economic inequalities. The three nations are the excluded, the insecure and the settled. Settled Scotland comprises those who are better able to protect themselves against unemployment, ill health and who are well educated. Excluded Scotland comprises those who are poorly educated, unemployed and live in sub standard housing. Insecure Scotland has people who are in low wage and insecure employment with little prospects.

If there is a digital underclass, then it will be found in marginalised, peripheral, urban communities.

If we are witnessing the rise of a new civilisation or 'third wave' (A. Toffler, The Third Wave, Pan Books, 1980 and Power Shift, Bantam Books, 1991, Creating A new Civilisation: The Politics of the Third Age, Turner Publishing, 1994) and passing through a period of epochal change to a mode of production where computers and their related genus are becoming a key infrastructure, if not the commanding heights of the economy, then this does raise the fundamental question: will the telematic era reward some, the digerati or Net arati, while leaving others behind, the digitally excluded? If so, what can be done to support the digital have not's and have late's? What type of programmes can be harnessed to ensure that the benefits of the Information Society are open to all and not just the sublime privilege of the techno priesthood? This paper outlines a digitally inclusive approach taken by CCIS Teleport.

2. LIFE ON THE DIGITAL FRONTIER

CCIS's mission statement pertains to:

"Encouraging community based agencies and businesses to migrate to, and through, the super digital highways by widening access to ICT networks and bringing low cost, user friendly facilities to the otherwise ICT have nots/have late's. Additionally, we provide access to the vocational training opportunities which local people require to keep pace with the employment and other opportunities afforded by the Information Society. In so doing, CCIS is catalysing digital inclusion and bringing the potential of the super highway to the benefit of the ordinary, everyday person."

Ours is a community development approach that promotes the notion of social capital in the Information Age/Knowledge Economy.

CCIS Teleport 'road tests' ideas on the Information Superhighway, verifying that low cost/high value and real value solutions and applications can be catalysed for community advantage. Here CCIS has developed a number of innovative programmes of activity on a socially inclusive basis working with Techno Tots, Keyboard Kids, Modem Mums, Digital Dads and Cyber Grannies. Additionally, we are an ISP running WANS/LANS and W3 networks, while also facilitating public access and vocational training opportunities

Below are detailed some of the programmes of activity we are road testing:

The Cyber Grannies - These Hi Tech priestesses of the steamie age have helped to dispel the myth that older folk can't use technology. Working with senior citizens on ICTs has been inspiring.. The Grans have spoken at national and international conferences and used video conferencing to debate with a professor from Massachussets Institute of Technology. Over the past two years has this project has blossomed and bloomed with members' increasing their self confidence and self esteem no end. Surely this is what social inclusion is all about?

The work with the Cyber Grans is part of our 'IT For All Our Futures/ IT from the Womb to the Tomb' programme of activity. It pertains to our belief that ICTs should not just be the preserve of the techno priesthood and that the Net has to become part of our common heritage.

The Techno Tots and keyboard Kids - Working with youngsters using interactive educational software to learn about geography, maths, history and English. The keyboard Kids have email accounts and virtual pen pals and participated in the MIT world Junior Summit. Yet another group of Keyboard Kids are looking at planning issues in Craigmillar, placing their findings before city planners thus helping to shape the transport agenda in the locality. This is interesting, as after all, it is these very youngsters of the late 20th Century who will be the civic leaders, entrepreneurs, planners and builders of the 21st. We are also working with a third group of Keyboard Kids, the Storytellers who are publishing their multi media stories on the W3. It is great to see children using the Internet to set free their young minds, scanning the furthest reaches of thought and creativity in the process. Is this not what social inclusion is all about?

Timelines - The past and future cross paths at CCIS, with timelines, a cross generational, computer mediated communications local history project using the Web. The Timelines project enables the keyboard Kids and Cyber Grans to come together and chat about the area's past and future in cyberspace. The Timelines Web site has become a sustainable, evolving and living treasure trove of remembered fact. The approach is novel because it is about people using technology to drive their ideas rather than just using technology for its own sake. Using ICTs to bridge the generation gap is surely what social inclusion is all about?

Hi Tech - Hi Touch: Telematics for Mental Relief - Another innovative example of our delivery of a digitally inclusive programme of activity is the work we have undertaken with a women's mental health support group called Oasis who use the Net to empower and inform themselves on medical conditions such as depression, anxiety, phobias, and learn about the side effects of drugs. Thus the Internet can become a powerful lever for people with mental health difficulties, as they use ICTs to build up their self esteem and confidence levels in a process of self -discovery. Here, we demonstrated that the Net can act as a powerful, 'personal' pheneomenon that can help inform and empower individuals.

Yet another illustrative use of technology for 'tele-health' advice and assistance is Craigmillar's listening ear that never sleeps, an online agony aunt ready to answer queries from locals with troubles. The service, called 'Dear Sue, is it True?' works like a normal problem page with professional and common sense advice to petitioners. This is a serious attempt to offer a digitised consultation service for local people on issue such as bereavement, depression, loneliness, marriage difficulties, drug and alcohol problems.

Inter EcoNet Edinburgh - Under the auspices of a Local Agenda 21 grant, CCIS is running a WAN designed to promote awareness of environmental issues, increase access to environmental information and encourage community action and participation in 'green schemes'. CCIS hosts nformation on a broad specturm of environmental issues and permits members to debate issues of concern such as genetically modified foods, pollution, deforestation and planning concerns.

Internetworking Communities Digitally - CCIS networks communities digitally by providing FREE software and access to Wider Area Networks. For instance, CCIS internetworks thirty Craigmillar groups, making Craigmillar an electronic village. We also service the Internet needs of other agencies in greater Edinburgh.

In our capacity as the European super hub (there are only four such hubs in the world) for a world-wide free net called Onenet, CCIS feeds nearly 800 sites in Europe. Here, Promotion of digital proximity and information democracy are our concern. Once again, we are promoting social inclusion.

The Teleport Initiative - The Teleport, or port of quality digital applications and service, is a resource for community and business use and is the first of its type in Scotland. It has allowed us to provide improved Internet access and includes a range of enhanced IT facilities including a techno Suite, IT lab and conference theatre.

Through the Teleport, CCIS now offers the competency based and vocational training programmes which help Craigmillar residents keep pace with employment opportunities in the Information Society, as well as developing electronic services for local businesses such as W3 promotion and email facilities.

In sum, the Teleport fits both with a culture of development that is about vocational training, business development and the enterprise culture, while promoting social inclusion, with lifelong learning opportunities and promotion of education, education and education, for all our futures.

Coms For Coms - ICTs for Craigmillar Companies - European funding means that CCIS has been able to develop the Teleport as a state of the art facility that allows opportunities for SMEs, through partnership with the Chambers of Commerce, local businesses and academic agencies to promote economic development and an enterprise culture that underpins the process of economic regeneration.

TAT2 - Technologically Aware Teachers for the Year 2000 - TAT2 is another initiative developed by CCIS in the past year. Here we work with local teachers showing them how to use ICTs to make them more confident about working with nursery children and pupils.

3. CONCLUSION - DEFINING THE FUTURE DIGITALLY

In Craigmillar, we have always striven not just to be of our generation, but to over reach our epoch. At the dawn of the millennium, it is my belief that our greatest responsibility is to embrace a new spirit of community for a new century, a spirit of partnership committed to developing community based approaches to our problems - a spirit imbued with the belief that ICTs can help us build a socially and digitally Craigmillar, a sustainable community in social, educational, recreational and economic terms.

It is imperative that socially and economically deprived communities such as Craigmillar cross the threshold of the Information Society and be given the opportunity to bridge the digital divide and avoid digital deprivation. Ultimately, few challenges will be more pressing.

Paul Saffo of the Institute of the Future has noted that, "the future is already here. It's just distributed unevenly" (Kaku, 1998). In Craigmillar, we will continue to give local people every opportunity to grasp the future digitally, but to help define it and share in the prosperity of the Information Society. That must be the shape of things to come, otherwise digital exclusion will reign supreme.